STORY-WORLD

837 complete story summaries

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Katha-Shatatrayi · Volume I

Complete unabridged story summaries · 837 stories

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Story 1 · The Flowerpot at the Window

After thirty-five years in the district education office, Shashibhushan Babu is approaching retirement. The pot of periwinkles on the office windowsill has survived through his daily care. On his last day, pressing work reduces the farewell ceremony to a brief formality. At the suggestion of Neeraj, the new clerk, he takes the plant home. There he confronts Malati's empty chair, the routines of a life now past, and the uncertainty of the days ahead. The next morning, resisting the urge to telephone the office, he places the flowerpot on his late wife's chair. In that small rearrangement lies the first intimation of a life beginning beyond the identity his employment had given him.

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Story 2 · The Application for Leave

Prabha Mishra, a teacher who has always discharged her duties without interruption, learns that her mother is unwell. Yet her anxiety about the school's work makes her reduce a request for three days' leave to a single day. At her mother's house, she attends to her needs. On a rainy evening, an ordinary question from her mother releases the loneliness Prabha has kept buried since the death of her husband, Arun. Her mother helps her understand that knowing of someone's grief and allowing that person to speak of it are two different things. On returning to school, Prabha asks for another two days' leave, although her mother is now well. The decision marks her first movement towards making time for her own heart and her relationships.

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Story 3 · The Letter That Arrived Late

In an old trunk, Sharada Devi discovers a sealed letter, twenty years old, addressed to her husband, Harinarayan Babu. At the time it was written, their son Manoj had quarrelled with his father over the question of marrying the woman of his choice and left for Delhi. Husband and wife suspect that the letter may be from Manoj. Unsure whether to open it, they begin speaking of the old silence, bitterness, and anxieties they had never shared with each other. Their present relationship with Manoj has long since returned to normal, but the questions of those earlier years remain unanswered. In the end, they sit together over tea without reading the letter. Their being there for one another becomes more important than the mystery inside the envelope.

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Story 4 · After the Rain Stopped

When the floodwaters recede, the earthen boundary between the fields of Ramlochan Yadav and Bindeshwar Mishra has been washed away. The two men once fought bitterly over that very line. Now, struggling with the damage to their fields and homes, the neighbours help each other. As they begin rebuilding the ridge, the old measurements once again come into conflict with their present needs. Gradually, concern for one another takes the place of their former rigidity. They return to their homes without an explicit apology or any declaration of reconciliation. Only afterwards does Ramlochan remember that the handle of Bindeshwar's hoe has come loose and ought to be repaired. That passing thought suggests that a damaged relationship, too, might yet be mended.

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Story 5 · The Evening Bus

Niranjan Jha is returning to his village after four years, carrying news of his promotion. On the bus he meets his former teacher, Rameshwar Sir, who still remembers his pupils, the village, and the smallest needs of its people. Niranjan measures his own successful professional life against the teacher's unadorned world of human connections. Their conversation brings back the school, old classmates, and people he has left behind. Between stepping off the bus and reaching home, he decides to visit his old school. His promotion remains an achievement, but the meaning of success widens for him: it comes to include remembering those who fell behind on life's journey, and those who still remember his name.

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Story 6 · The Empty Bed

After her daughter Anupama's wedding, Kaushalya Devi looks into the empty room and at the bedsheet patterned with blue flowers. Her daughter is trying to settle into a new life far from home, yet to her mother the absence inhabits every object in the house. In conversations with her husband, Maheshwar Babu, their neighbours, and Anupama herself, Kaushalya comes to understand that it would be wrong to lay the weight of her loneliness upon her daughter. Anupama's belongings, old lists, and the question of what to do with the room continually draw her thoughts back to the young woman. At last, instead of rushing into household tasks, she sits beside the empty bed for a while. Her silence becomes an exercise in letting her daughter go freely and acknowledging her own sorrow.

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Story 7 · Pension Day

Retired Bhuvaneshwar Babu goes to the bank to have the latest pension entry recorded. He trusts the printed figures in his passbook more than any notification on a mobile phone. The wait at the bank, encounters with acquaintances, and a conversation with another pensioner, Shambhunath, bring home the changes in his daily life. Back home, he helps a neighbourhood boy, Sonu, with an application and speaks to a former office colleague on the telephone. The pension has already reached his account, yet he still remembers the seventh of the following month. The simple act of placing a blue pen beside his red one expresses a wish to remain useful and to discover a new routine beyond accounts and calculations.

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Story 8 · Two Letters

For six years, an old grey umbrella belonging to his friend Ramakant Chaudhary has hung in Sudhanshu Babu's house. Two letters carved into its handle hold the memory of that friendship. When his own umbrella breaks on a rainy day, Sudhanshu takes the old one out. Small incidents at school and along the road recall his relationship with Ramakant and their last meeting. Regret returns: during his friend's illness, he had been too occupied with his own affairs to offer him enough companionship. He cannot change what has passed, but he can still reach out to the family of his dead friend. At last, he sends a message asking after Ramakant's relatives.

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Story 9 · The Day of Handing Over the Keys

For years, Ramcharit Kaka's life has been bound up with the school gate, its rooms, and its bell. On the last day of his service, he must place his old ring of eleven keys in someone else's hands. The familiar sounds of the school, its pupils, and the affection of its teachers have become inseparable from his existence. After the formal farewell he must face the stillness of home and the knowledge that he will not go to school tomorrow. In his diary he writes that the school will go on, while he will remain at home. Between those two sentences he searches for a new sense of himself. At the close, he looks for a screwdriver to repair a loose door at home: his instinct to work and care for things has not ended with his employment.

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Story 10 · Two Cups of Tea

One evening, three cups of tea are set out again in Devaki Devi's house, but the old ease has gone out of the family. During Tarakant Babu's visit and conversation, the silence that has settled between Devaki and Harinath becomes unmistakable. News from Hyderabad, an old suitcase, and the different ways in which tea is served remind them all of things left unsaid. As the days pass, the two continue to speak about necessary household matters, but their emotional distance does not suddenly disappear. In the last scene they drink tea while the old suitcase lies coated in dust. It is a delicate portrait of domestic intimacy, estrangement, and a conversation still unfinished.

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Story 11 · Across the Road

Shivkant Babu has lived alone for three years. His veranda opens towards the main road, and the house across it, with its evening lights, has become a familiar part of his days, although he scarcely knows its occupants. A change in the activity of that house unsettles him. Caught between his own loneliness and his reluctance to intrude upon another person's life, he sometimes walks as far as the gate, and sometimes holds back the question on his lips. Slowly, the people on both sides of the road begin to recognise the importance of one another's presence. In the end, Shivkant Babu leaves the light burning on his veranda. It is a small but meaningful answer.

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Story 12 · Notice of the Removal of a Name

Eight months after Raghunath Mishra's death, Shailendra must complete the formalities for removing his father's name from the government records of their home. On paper it is an ordinary correction; in the house, his father's chair, walking stick, and other objects filled with memory remain where they were. While obtaining certificates, answering questions at the office, and drawing up a new list of family members, Shailendra realises that striking a name from a register and erasing a person's presence from life are not the same thing. Kamala Devi and the other members of the household remain on the revised list. The story ends with a light burning on the veranda and the shadow of the walking stick upon the wall.

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Story 13 · The Last Page of the Notebook

Sudha Mishra, a teacher, finds a few lines on the last page of her pupil Pallavi's notebook describing the hardships at home and her determination to study. Caring for a younger brother, doing household work, and meeting the demands of school, Pallavi struggles to keep her education alive. The lines awaken memories of Sudha's own childhood. She speaks to the girl, tries to understand her circumstances, and gives her the courage to bring in her work even when it is unfinished. The routine act of checking a notebook becomes an opportunity to recognise a child's silent struggle. The story shows the value, within education, of listening, allowing time, and inspiring trust—things that matter beyond marks.

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Story 14 · The Dry Branch of the Mango Tree

On the eve of the sale of her ancestral home, Malati arrives to find that an old branch of the mango tree in the courtyard has been cut down. She is distressed, but her brother Prabhakar explains that it had become hollow within and dangerous. As they gather up the household belongings, memories of their parents' lives and their own childhood return to them both. Malati is unwilling to take on the practical burden of keeping the house, yet accepting its sale is no easier. Once the deed is registered, she carries away her mother's small iron box. Her decision not to look back does not mean she has freed herself from memory; it signals her acceptance of the hard truth of a life changed beyond recall.

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Story 15 · An Unemployed Afternoon

Aniruddha spends his unemployed days at Lakhan's tea stall at the crossroads. Competitive examinations, the wait for results, and his family's expectations steadily test his confidence. Conversations at the stall and an incident connected with a young girl named Nidhi and her studies compel him to think again about his own usefulness. He knows that the fear of failure is real, but that abandoning everyday effort cannot be the answer. By the afternoon's end, neither his employment prospects nor any examination result has changed. Nevertheless, he rises from the tea stall, crosses the road, and takes the path towards the library. In that ordinary decision survives the desire to move forward within a life that has seemed to stand still.

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Story 16 · The Call That Did Not Come

Living alone in Madhubani, Gopal Babu waits each Sunday for a call from his son Neeraj, who has settled in Bengaluru. One Sunday the telephone does not ring at the appointed hour, and the entire day passes in waiting and apprehension. Since the death of his wife, Shailaja, these weekly conversations have been the anchor of his routine. Gradually he begins to occupy himself with the soil and plants behind the house. The following Sunday the telephone rings, but he first finishes building the earthen rim around a guava sapling and only then answers it. The story ends with this quiet change: he has begun to find meaning in his days beyond the act of waiting.

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Story 17 · A Small Award

Shashikant Mishra receives word that a local literary council has chosen to honour him. Recognition of his earlier writing gives him pleasure, yet amid the ceremony, speeches, and photographs he is conscious of how completely he has almost given up writing. Later, a child's simple question—why does he no longer write?—reaches him more deeply than any tribute spoken at the event. Back home he records the question in his diary and, after a long interval, writes a new line. He is not entirely satisfied with it, but he does not cross it out. The award becomes not a final seal upon his literary life but an impulse to begin again.

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Story 18 · New Neighbours

A family—Abhinav, Nilima, and their children—moves into the house next to Saraswati Devi's, which has stood locked for five years. After some initial reserve, their acquaintance grows into affection through small daily kindnesses: fetching medicine in illness, sharing coriander from the garden, and talking about household matters. Saraswati Devi's own children live far away, and the new friendship brings fresh movement into her solitary days. A few months later, the family leaves and the house is empty once more. The gate closes again, but the green plants they have tended together remain in Saraswati Devi's garden. The story carries the quiet tenderness and sorrow of a neighbourly attachment that was never meant to last.

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Story 19 · The Creak of the Chair

Ramlochan Yadav visits the panchayat building on the pretext of looking at papers for an old drainage scheme. In truth, the building and one particular old chair hold countless memories of his public life. Through conversations with Bhola, Raghunandan, and others he has known for years, he feels his place changing amid new arrangements and new people in authority. The chair's creak reminds him of his former power and of the distance that now separates him from it. Little by little, instead of insisting on having his own say, he begins listening closely to others. In the final scene, he asks Bhola to repeat what he has said—a modest sign of the change taking place within him.

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Story 20 · Seven in the Morning

Retired teacher Raghunath Jha still wakes early, as he always did. For years, seven in the morning meant setting out for school. Now the veranda, a cup of tea, his bicycle, household tasks, and time spent with his wife Kamala Devi are beginning to form a new rhythm. Memories of the school bell and former pupils repeatedly pull him back towards his old role. He is learning instead to pay attention to the small objects and moments of his home. At the end, when a bell rings at seven, his feet move instinctively towards the door. But he does not rise to check the time; he stays seated, holding his cup of tea.

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Story 21 · Two Tickets

Ramvilas Chaudhary almost always buys two bus tickets together, although he travels alone. Neither Mahesh, the conductor, nor the other passengers understand the habit. One day a woman travelling to the medical hospital in Patna needs a seat for herself and her sick child, and Ramvilas gives her his second ticket. During the journey he recalls the help once given by a woman he did not know, an act that opened a way into the future for a young girl. In memory of that kindness he has made a habit of paying for another seat. The following month he again asks for two tickets. There is still no one beside him, but the possibility of someone being there remains open.

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Story 22 · The Box of Bangles

Before her death, Malati Devi gave her daughter Sumitra a blue velvet box, telling her to open it seven days before Nandini's wedding. In trying to unravel its mystery, Sumitra goes to see Harilal. There she learns that her mother and father, Rameshwar Jha, had paid instalments for years to have the bangles made. Even after Malati's death, her husband continued to fulfil their shared promise. On the wedding day, the bangles are given to Nandini. The receipts left in the box bear the separate signatures of her mother and father, tangible witnesses to their joint affection and long years of sacrifice.

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Story 23 · One Rupee Short

Girish Sah, owner of an old grocery shop in Barhi Bazaar, is known for balancing his accounts down to the last paisa. An entry showing one rupee outstanding in the name of Phulkali Devi troubles him. He searches the ledger, counts the small change, and revisits conversations with customers in an effort to understand the discrepancy. The dispute over so little money forces him to reflect upon the connection between the strictness of business and the memory of human relationships. Eventually the accounts balance, but the incident teaches him that trust built with people, and the memory of it, matter more than the figures in his ledger. Looking at the empty bowl for loose coins, he comes to see his old habits differently.

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Story 24 · The Photo Studio

Pankaj Jha, owner of Jyoti Photo Studio at Benta Chowk, watches the demand for studio photographs change in the age of mobile phones. While preparing portraits for two old customers, Aniruddha and Shail Devi, he begins to feel that a photograph is not merely a face to be improved: it is also evidence of a person's lived existence. Removing a mark, spectacles, or wrinkles may make an image more attractive, but it can diminish the subject's identity. This understanding reaches into Pankaj's own family. At last he photographs his father with his actual spectacles, white hair, and the lines upon his forehead left intact.

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Story 25 · The Red Sweater

At a women's weaving cooperative, Usha Devi checks the measurements and quality of finished sweaters. When a red sweater proves to be six inches shorter than the measurement written on its slip, she rejects it. But Gita, who knitted it, stands by her work. When the customer, Sulekha Devi, arrives with her son Chandan, the real need behind the measurement comes to light. The gap between a rule, a craftswoman's experience, and the body of the person who must wear the garment becomes clear. Usha Devi acknowledges that, in this instance, Gita understood the requirement better than the slip did. A new line is entered in the record. The story affirms the usefulness of rules while insisting upon the human necessity of listening.

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Story 26 · The Key

After fourteen years in the same house, Kamala Devi is packing to move elsewhere. Alongside ordinary family life, the house has hosted evening lessons for children. As Kamala speaks with her landlord, Harimohan Babu, they recall acts of kindness from years gone by. Kamala is leaving her home, but she does not want the teaching to end. She passes the key and the notebooks into new hands. Finally, in the small room, Rinki begins teaching the children and writes a new date. The main gate is closed, yet the little door opening onto the lane remains open: the shared undertaking goes on.

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Story 27 · Ten Minutes

Lalita Devi hurries through Darbhanga station to catch the train to Patna. It is essential that documents reach her niece Renu in time for verification. Amid the platform, the stairs, her bag, and the rush of minutes, she encounters a young man, Shashank, who is carrying his own papers towards the same train. Small gestures of help and their conversation gradually make the purpose of each journey clear. At the last moment the important envelope reaches the right hands, and the train leaves on time. In ten frantic minutes a bond of trust and cooperation is formed between strangers. At the close, the two walk slowly away, with the contrasting sensations of a lighter bag and emptied hands.

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Story 28 · The Last Customer

On the final day before closing his old barber's shop, Ramsevak Thakur packs away his belongings. The aged combs, scissors, mirror, and signboard bear witness to a long working life. His apprentice Nandu worries about what will become of these things. As the master cuts the hair of Montu, his last customer, memories of their apprenticeship and the skill of service rise to the surface. Even on his final day, Ramsevak does not alter his established fee. The shutter comes down, but the bundle of white cloth left in Nandu's hands suggests that although a business may close, its craft and affection can live on in someone else's keeping.

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Story 29 · The Broken Clock

Madhavi finds an old clock in the house whose hands and numerals seem to run backwards. At first she thinks it is broken or badly made. Conversations with Badri Sah, a clockmaker, and members of her family reveal that it was designed that way for a particular purpose. The memory of her ailing grandmother's bed, the old arrangement of the room, and the reflection in a mirror explain the reason for this reversed time. Madhavi comes to understand that the meaning of an object can change according to the direction from which it is seen. At the end the clock on the wall still runs backwards, while in the mirror time appears to move steadily forward.

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Story 30 · The Box of Sweets

Seema Devi wants an elegant cream-coloured box of sweets for guests visiting her home. Her daughter Mrinal says that taste matters most, but Seema, anxious about social standing and appearances, chooses an expensive box. Later, a number marked beneath it and the arrangement for its deposit reveal what the display really amounts to. In conversation, their neighbour Devkinandan Babu helps Seema see that a handsome box may circulate from hand to hand, while the worth of a relationship is something else entirely. In the end, the box goes back to the shop, and three members of the family share the two pedas left at home. For Seema Devi, the golden edging has lost its charm.

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Story 31 · A Small Advertisement

For six months, Nilesh Jha has been searching for employment, submitting applications wherever he can. At first, the thought of placing a small ‘Work Wanted’ advertisement in the newspaper embarrasses him. Once it appears, however, people begin contacting him to fill out forms, draft applications, and put their papers in order. Each assignment takes time, and through it he comes to understand the value of his labour differently. An opportunity to work with Javed, who runs a photocopy shop, begins to take shape. Nilesh has still not secured a regular job, but the little newspaper cutting is no longer proof of failure. It is the first sign of a path he is making through his own abilities.

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Story 32 · The Blue Pen

Mamta brings her mother Phulkumari Devi's signature on a scholarship-renewal form, but the school's old records bear her mother's thumbprint. The clerk, Vinod Jha, questions the difference between the two marks. His question brings to light the fact that Phulkumari learned her letters gradually in adulthood and practised writing her name with a blue pen. The school verifies her identity and accepts it. By signing her own name, Phulkumari moves beyond the limits of the thumbprint once used in her place. The account presents literacy not merely as formal schooling but as a matter of self-respect and the right to inscribe one's own identity.

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Story 33 · The Wooden Horse

Sushila from an anganwadi centre brings a battered wooden rocking horse to the craftsman Dharmnath for repair. Its faded paint, broken ear, and loosened plank make it seem almost beyond use. Dharmnath studies the old construction and undertakes the necessary repairs. Soon the children are climbing onto the horse again, one after another. The craftsman realises that an old object need not be kept merely as a museum piece; it may return to the life for which it was made. Instead of writing a lengthy account of its past in his ledger, he enters just two words: 'Moving again.' In that brief phrase, labour, memory, and renewed life meet.

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Story 34 · The Sewing Machine

The traders' association decides to honour the elderly tailor Shivnath Thakur. Everyone knows his name and the reputation of his shop, but it is his wife, Savitri, who has kept the sewing machine running. As preparations for the ceremony proceed, her overlooked labour comes into view. Shivnath acknowledges that speaking to customers, taking measurements, and cutting cloth were his responsibilities, while Savitri performed most of the sewing. The organisers decide that she must have her rightful place in the public honour. At last, both names appear on the shop's signboard, and Neera begins learning to operate the machine. The account recognises women's unseen labour and the passing of traditional skill to another generation.

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Story 35 · A Pair of Shoes

While compiling an inventory of old belongings, Madhu Jha, the new superintendent of a women's hostel, comes upon a pair of black shoes. Vimala Didi, an attendant, explains that for years the shoes have passed from one student in need to another. Nisha borrows them for an examination or a job-related occasion and then returns them. During an inspection, the shoes are recorded not as anyone's private property but as something held in common. The fact that the original owner's name is unknown ceases to matter. In the final scene, the shoes wait for the next person who needs them. Through this modest object, the account explores dignity, mutual help, and the meaning of shared use.

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Story 36 · The Lost Wallet

Raghuvir Mandal, a bicycle mechanic at the bus stand, finds a wallet. Alongside money and an identity card, it contains a number of small slips bearing people's names and amounts. In searching for its owner, the bus conductor Devendra, Raghuvir discovers that these notes record more than ordinary debts: they preserve memories of trust between people. As he checks the figures, he is reminded of money he himself has yet to repay. The wallet finds its way back to its rightful owner. Later Raghuvir makes a fresh slip for a small sum, observing that money may be a small matter, but what one has a duty to remember is never small.

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Story 37 · The Rented Room

A little rented room in Sharada Devi's house in Darbhanga has sheltered many young women students for a time. Her daughter Kiran examines the blue register, with its entries for rent and dates of departure. An earlier tenant, Rita, had left the rent for her remaining two days to be used by the next examination candidate. In this way Sonam, who has come to sit the teachers' examination, finds shelter for a night. Another name and date are entered in the register, but the room is not charged for a second time. The account shows how a rented room may become more than a site of payment and exchange: it can also be a place where strangers share trust and opportunity.

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Story 38 · The Unnamed Parcel

After Kaushalya Devi's death, a parcel without a sender's name arrives at the yellow-gated house of her son Arun Jha. Arun and Nilima examine its wrapping, names, and old papers, gradually uncovering a story that connects several neighbouring households. They learn that Kaushalya Devi used to carry belongings, books, and small necessities from one home to another on the strength of mutual trust. The parcel is no mysterious gift, but one link in those unfinished journeys. Arun and Nilima take responsibility for delivering the remaining things to their intended recipients. In the end, their mother's empty cloth bag seems to them not an image of absence, but a space kept open for others.

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Story 39 · Behind the Photograph

An old family photograph hanging in Vijaykant Jha's home has always been taken as a memory of the family gathered together. When the frame is repaired, notes on the back and an old register belonging to Naresh Photo Service reveal that it was assembled from photographs taken in different places. At first, the family members are unsettled by the discovery. But when they see the original images, they begin to understand Gauri Devi's wish: that those living far apart might appear together in a single picture. The photograph is not a record of one historical gathering. It is a deliberate creation of family togetherness across the distances that separated them.

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Story 40 · Two Lamps

In the lane by the peepal tree, darkness falls differently on the paved road and the unpaved settlement. At Diwali, following Mangala Kaki's advice, one lamp is placed on the doorstep and a second at the bend in the lane. Nayan at first thinks the arrangement unnecessary, but soon understands the difficulty faced by people walking in darkness and the need for light at the turning. Oil, wicks, and the modest expense of keeping the lamp alight become matters of shared concern. In time, the lamp at the bend is no longer a festive ornament alone. As the night grows deeper, someone adds oil to it again. The account centres on a community's responsibility for a public way.

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Story 41 · The Last Row

Madhav, an electrician, receives an invitation to the wedding of Suresh Babu's daughter Anjali and is also engaged to arrange the decorative lighting. At the celebration, he is treated now as a guest, now as a labourer. When he repairs a fault in the lights, questions of where he should eat and how he should be treated come to the fore. The invitation card and the receipt for his wages seem to assign him different places in society. In the end, Madhav collects the payment for his work and departs. In his bag lie both the wedding invitation and the wage receipt. The account questions the distinction between guest and worker, and the labour concealed behind a wedding's brilliance.

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Story 42 · Four Hands of Cloth

For Neha's school uniform at the beginning of the new session, the list calls for four hands of cloth, a traditional measure of length. In the market, Rama Devi compares prices and measurements, only to discover that four hands taken from bolts of different widths do not yield the same quantity of fabric. The difference is discussed with Vimala the seamstress, Badri Sah the shopkeeper, and at a school parents' meeting. It emerges that the old uniform instruction assumed a width of cloth no longer standard everywhere. The list and the receipts must therefore be understood afresh. Rama keeps the two receipts bearing different measurements with the list, so that the confusion may be avoided next time.

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Story 43 · Shared Shade

Ramsagar and Nasima Khatoon run neighbouring carts on the pavement. A net stretched between them gives both relief from the sun, but it crosses the boundary allotted by the municipal authority and must be taken down. They apply for public shade in the interest of everyone who uses the space, and an official inquiry follows. The rule sheet declares the net unlawful, while verification of its shared use remains incomplete. The government-issued net ends up safely stored beneath a cart, and the path between the stalls remains exposed to the same fierce sunlight. The account lays bare the contradiction between boundaries drawn on paper and a community's actual need.

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Story 44 · A Day's Leave

Sudha Jha deducts money from the monthly wages of Malati Devi, her domestic worker, because Malati missed a day's work. Yet the record of her working days, additional duties, and work performed in exchange is far from clear. Sudha and Malati talk through the circumstances and reconcile the details of that day. The question arises of what terms should be used to record a household worker's time and leave. Eventually, they begin a written register to make the handling of wages and absences explicit. Malati chooses the following Wednesday as leave, not as a day to be made up later. In both records the same words are entered with the same meaning: ‘Approved leave.’

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Story 45 · The Tin Box Held as Security

An old green tin box belonging to Govind has stood in bicycle mechanic Nasim Ansari's shop for four months, left there as security. A name and an amount are written on it, but neither its contents nor the owner's true circumstances are clear to everyone. At last Govind returns with his wife and little daughter. As he takes back the box, the old transaction gives way to a recognition of human trust. Nasim helps the family carry their possessions away. The green tin box is loaded onto the roof of a bus; in the shop, a clean rectangular mark remains where it had rested. It is a quiet picture of trust amid poverty, and of what a pledge can mean.

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Story 46 · Half a Sack

Ramlochan Yadav, a sharecropper, and Shashibhushan Jha, the landowner, have agreed to divide the paddy harvest equally. The sacks are weighed in the threshing yard, but differences between wet and dry grain make equality difficult to establish. Consulting Tulsi Sah's calculations and examining the moisture in the paddy, both parties count again. Their effort to measure correctly brings questions of labour, trust, and natural conditions into the reckoning. At last the grain is divided. A little that remains in the threshing yard is given to the chickens; after the scales have been removed, for the first time no pointer there is left trembling.

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Story 47 · The Other Entrance

At Asha Health Centre, patients attending a free medical camp are directed to ‘the other entrance’, while regular patients enter by the main door. Neelam and the health workers see how the division creates unnecessary confusion and a sense of difference among those seeking care. For a time, once the distinction is set aside, patients move about with greater ease. Dr Neha, too, questions the need for two entrances. Yet the old instruction reappears on the preparations list for the next camp. Neelam puts a question mark beside that line. The account closes not with a ready-made solution, but with the beginning of a thought that may change the system.

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Story 48 · Five Chairs

Five red chairs are set out for a school meeting, each bearing a slip with an official's name. Heavy rain prevents the expected guests from arriving. As the meeting proceeds, the real needs of the people present—the staff and villagers among them—begin to matter more than the hierarchy of seats. A mark left by a rain-soaked sari remains on one of the chairs before the furniture is put away. The meeting is completed without its chairperson. Preparing the report, Nandkishore writes ‘Meeting held’, but leaves the space for ‘Seating arrangements’ blank. The account exposes the distance between the ceremonial importance of a chair and the actual presence of people.

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Story 49 · The Washerman's Mark

Prabha Devi opens a bundle of laundered clothes and begins counting her saris. Doubt about the whereabouts of one garment soon arises. At the washerman's home, amid Chhotan's notebook and a conversation with Shashikala, a question of mistaken counting gradually becomes a crisis of trust. The garments are searched for and counted again, but the suspicion voiced between people leaves a mark of its own. In the end, the correct number of garments is entered as five. Bhola the washerman puts a small blue mark inside the cloth to prevent future mistakes of identification. Yet the account makes clear that the mark of distrust left in the lane runs deeper than the mark on the fabric.

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Story 50 · The Hours of Labour

At the gate of a building under construction, Kailash the watchman records when the labourers enter and leave. But the contractor's wage slips show different working hours, reducing the monthly pay of Budhan and the other workers. A dispute arises over where to count the minutes spent reaching the gate, standing in line for tools, and waiting for the actual work to begin. Two separate registers and a conversation with the proprietor, Vinod Sah, bring the old practice under scrutiny. Under a new calculation, the workers' time is acknowledged more clearly. As the building takes shape, the invisible hours of those who build it also begin to receive their due.

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Story 51 · The Red Seal

Shakuntala Devi, a widow, arrives at the block office with the documents for her pension application in a blue folder. Although the certificates and forms are all present, the demand for a red seal sends her from one desk to another. Her daughter Payal keeps account of the journeys' cost and her mother's medicines. After questions from the officials, the application moves forward and the requirement for the seal is clarified. But completed paperwork is not the same thing as receiving a pension. Back at home, Shakuntala says that the rest of the calculation can be made only when the first payment arrives. Beneath her list of expenses, Payal leaves a blank space.

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Story 52 · A Common Field Boundary

After the rains, a dispute arises over cutting the grass that grows on the earthen ridge between the fields of Gopal Yadav and Raghunandan. The ridge is a boundary, yet its turf, soil, and water serve both fields. What begins as a question of rights over grass becomes a discussion of boundaries, labour, and responsibility. Amid small measurements and memories of earlier disagreements, both men try to recognise their own mistakes. At last the issue of the grass fades, and the shared usefulness of the earth beneath it becomes clear. The ridge that separates their fields also holds water for them both, and so belongs to their common responsibility.

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Story 53 · A Plate of Rice

Jagdish Sah, proprietor of Janak Bhojanalaya, keeps a strict account of meal prices and outstanding debts. The question of feeding Murli, a customer in need, compels him to reconsider his old rules. Discovering that Murli, too, maintains his own accounts in a notebook, Jagdish realises that help can be given without injuring another person's dignity. He makes provision to serve meals on credit within a fixed limit, while insisting that every amount be recorded. At the end, every plate served is properly entered in the restaurant's ledger. The account finds a place for organised assistance and a working person's self-respect between charity and debt.

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Story 54 · The Rented Handcart

Each day Sarita Devi rents handcart number five from Bhola Sah. The daily charge of seventy rupees shapes her hours of trading and her reckoning of earnings. One day, when the cart is given to someone else, Sarita and Bhola dispute who has a right to the unused hours after a full day's rent has been paid. Discussion and careful calculation open the possibility of sharing the cart's hours of use. A new method of keeping accounts begins in the ledger. The same four wheels and the same white numeral five remain on the cart, but for Sarita the economic value of time has become unmistakably clear.

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Story 55 · Three Glasses of Water

At a private hospital, water is free for patients and those accompanying them, but a deposit of twenty rupees is required for each steel tumbler. To use three tumblers and reclaim her deposit, Seema Devi must go from one desk to another. Queues, slips, and minutes counted make the actual burden of this supposedly free facility plain. She questions the complications of the arrangement. Later the system is altered so that the deposit can be returned more easily when the tumblers are handed back. In the final scene, Seema recognises that the water was free all along; what has changed is the needless labour and time consumed in recovering the deposit.

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Story 56 · The Line for a Name

The attendance register at a flood-relief camp records the number of family members under the name of the household head. During the distribution of relief, Manjari Devi realises that her own name has no proper place in the total. Questions of family lists, individual identity, and the correction of permanent records take her through one official procedure after another. Although her name appears in the temporary relief register, it takes far longer to establish its place in the permanent household register. Long after the floodwaters have withdrawn, the correction of the record continues. Being counted among those present for relief and being registered under one's own name, the account shows, are different rights.

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Story 57 · A Sample of the Harvest

At a paddy procurement centre, farmers' sacks must first be registered, then inspected for quality and weighed. Kiran, a farmer, questions the procedure for taking samples, particularly the removal of grain before the sacks are weighed. In discussions with Shashibhushan, a centre employee, and others, the question becomes whose share should bear the weight of the sample. The rule is changed so that samples are taken after weighing. Purchases continue under the new procedure until evening. The paddy, the bowl, the testing implement, and the scales remain the same; but moving the moment at which a handful of grain is taken makes a fairer reckoning of the farmer's share possible.

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Story 58 · The Little Awning

Mamta Devi, a tenant, has a small tin awning fitted above her doorway to keep out the rain. Her landlord, Shivkant, raises questions about permission and ownership of the wall. An examination of the screws, the fall of the water, the plaster, and the direction of the drain makes it clear that the tenant's comfort and the building's safety cannot be separated. With a mason's help, a workable repair is found. The awning remains Mamta's possession and the wall Shivkant's property, but the rainwater binds them in a shared responsibility. The account reveals the practical truth of common maintenance across the boundaries of ownership.

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Story 59 · A Bar of Soap

At a women's hostel, each student is entitled to one bar of bathing soap a month. When the distribution figures are reconciled, one bar seems to be missing, and the first question is who has taken it. The superintendent, Kaushalya Devi, the attendants, and the students go through the lists. Their inquiry shows that nothing has been stolen or lost: one student's name was omitted from the distribution register. Once the new student's presence is acknowledged, the total is corrected. The account links fairness in applying a rule to the proper place of a person in the record. Writing down forty-nine names matters every bit as much as counting forty-nine bars of soap.

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Story 60 · Beyond the Accounts

On the night the autumn fair ends, Ramlochan Sah, a spice merchant, adds up his income and expenses. Sushma, Maya Devi, and other family members have worked in the shop, arranged goods, and carried out domestic tasks, but the cash ledger assigns no value to their efforts. The family debates whether labour for which no separate wage has been paid should be excluded from the calculation of profit. At last, alongside the line recording cash savings, they make a list of the work contributed by the family. There is no less money in the cashbox. Yet the figure called profit can no longer be separated from the invisible labour behind it.

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Story 61 · The Wall's Second Life

Before the rains, the old wall of Ramdulari Devi's house begins to show signs that it needs repair. Anupama is distressed at the thought that removing the traditional paintings from its surface will also destroy the memories they hold. She first makes a record of their principal forms, colours and lines. Only then does the mason Chandeshwar remove the old, damp plaster and rebuild the wall. Ramdulari Devi encourages Anupama not merely to copy what was there before, but to paint something new with her own hands. When the new painting is complete, Anupama begins drawing in the space that remains, without looking at a photograph. The preservation of tradition becomes an act of fresh creation.

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Story 62 · Threads of Two Colours

After weaving eighteen hands of blue cloth, the weaver Neera notices that the depth of the colour changes after the ninth hand. The batches of yarn ordered under the same description are not, in fact, identical in colour. Questions arise about the customer's order for twenty hands of cloth, the payment for the work and the quality of the finished fabric. On Savitri Devi's advice, Neera marks the different portions of the cloth and raises the need for a change in the working rules. She does not receive the full payment for the immediate order, but a system is established for inspecting each batch of yarn before weaving begins. The tale shows that marking a defect after discovering it is not enough: one must recognise differences at their source before the work starts.

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Story 63 · The Path Through the Orchard

In the orchard Shashidhar Jha inherits after his father's death, an old, winding path runs between the trees. He wants to straighten it so that fruit can be carried out more easily. Measuring and levelling a new path brings convenience for a few days, but rain, roots and the flow of water soon expose its weaknesses. His mother, Sharada Devi, explains that the old path took shape slowly through the seasons, among the trees, and through the movements of those who used it. Drawing on these observations, Anvita prepares a new plan. In the end, the orchard's winding course is understood not as an error but as knowledge accumulated through long experience of the land and its uses.

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Story 64 · A Painting Without a Name

Manjari and Renu paint together on the white wall of the old school veranda. Inspired by shifting squares of sunlight, trees and shade, they create a painting in which the lines and colours of each are interwoven. The school's records, however, provide space for only one artist's name and cannot fairly represent their shared labour. A new way is sought to record each person's part, the revisions and the collaboration. In the end, the light painted on the wall remains still while the real sunlight moves on. The empty line in the register, like the distance between those two kinds of light, recalls the part of creation that cannot be contained within a single name.

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Story 65 · Seven Minutes of Voices

Saurabh draws seven small circles in his notebook to mark the subjects he wants to cover in each conversation. His telephone time with his mother, Rama Devi, who lives far away, is limited, so he carefully arranges questions about mathematics, his grandmother's health, his shoes and the little matters of each day. As they talk, he begins to discover aspects of his mother's work, railway journeys and crowded days that had found no place on his list. Silence, too, becomes a part of their conversation. Sometimes Saurabh writes a note about the silence in the seventh circle; sometimes he leaves it empty. The tale explores listening, waiting and affection beyond words in a bond between mother and son constrained by time.

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Story 66 · The Earthen Bowl

Deepak the potter receives an order for a hundred earthen bowls of exactly the same size for a restaurant in the city. Bowls shaped by hand naturally vary, while the customer wants them to stack conveniently and serve food uniformly. Deepak and his grandfather Ramcharan experiment with measurements, small bowls and different shapes. Gradually they realise that what matters more than an exact likeness is a common standard of usefulness and capacity. Even after the order is completed, the old bowl at home has not become worthless simply because its shape is different. The tale seeks a balance between handcraft, standardisation and the purpose an object actually serves.

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Story 67 · The Star Above the Roof

For a science exercise, Aditi resolves to watch the stars at the same hour each evening for twenty days and record what she observes. Yet on the family's shared roof, papads are laid out, clothes are dried, pickles are kept in the sun, and people come and go, repeatedly obstructing her view. At first these interruptions irritate her. Then she begins to record the family's daily use of the roof, the direction of sunlight and the changing hours as well. In conversations with Manjula Devi, scientific observation and household labour find room on the same rooftop. In the end Aditi decides that she will look at the papads first and the stars afterwards; if clouds fill the sky, she will write about the clouds. The tale opens curiosity to a wider field of vision.

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Story 68 · The Thin Curtain

After her marriage, Lalita comes to live in Amresh's joint family. The thin curtain hung for privacy alters the passage through the veranda, the route taken by Grandmother Saraswati Devi and the light entering the room. Questions about its height, edge, ventilation and light become questions of domestic propriety as well as convenience. Lalita and the other members of the household take turns measuring and testing arrangements that will give the newly married couple a space of their own without obstructing the movements of the elders. At last little Pihu comes in along the newly opened passage, and the line of light is unbroken. The tale portrays household boundaries being remade through mutual agreement.

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Story 69 · Measuring the Shade

The old neem tree at the school becomes the subject of dispute because of cracks in the building's wall and pressure from its roots. The pupils want to preserve its shade, while the engineer and the headmistress raise questions about safety and repairs. Different measurements are made of the tree, its shade, its roots and the school's use of the space. Eventually a decision addressing safety also makes provision for new shade and for planting trees and saplings. Madhura no longer looks only for the place once occupied by the old neem; she watches the direction of the sun and the shade beginning to take shape anew. On the measuring tape is written a reminder that the shade will be measured again. The tale examines the difficult balance between protecting nature and ensuring collective safety.

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Story 70 · Lamps in Both Homes

In art class, Anvi is asked to paint a picture on the theme ‘The Lamp in My Home’. Her life is divided between two separate homes, her mother's and her father's, and choosing just one does not seem right to her. During the festival in Kartik she experiences the customs, cleaning, aripan designs and lamps of both households. Rather than set one home against the other, she accepts the place each has in her life. Her finished painting shows an aripan at the doorway of the house on the left, a lamp on the steps of the house on the right, and an open path between them. That path becomes a sign of Anvi's freedom to move between both homes and to belong in each.

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Story 71 · Lessons on the Veranda

Twice a week, the veranda of a former headmaster's house becomes a shared place for reading. As the women read an account of floods, relief work and the building of a school in a book of local history, they ask why it contains no names of those who cooked the meals, looked after supplies and laboured day and night. Surma Devi, Phulkali Kaki, Jamuna Devi and Ritu gather accounts from different witnesses and prepare a supplementary record of this work alongside the original text. The old book is neither torn apart nor rejected; the new record is placed beside it. The tale is an exercise in adding the voices of those omitted from history to what has already been written.

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Story 72 · A Name Beneath the Toy

At ‘Madhav Toy House’, wooden horses, bullock carts and other toys are made through the labour of many hands. When questions arise about the identity and maker of an old toy, Ira sees that cutting the wood, shaping it, painting it and attaching the wheels are the work of different craftspeople. Giving the whole toy one person's name does not tell the full history of its making. The workshop introduces a system of marking a serial number on the underside and recording the contributions of the known artisans. Where information is unavailable, the entry is left blank rather than filled with a guess. In the end, the toy carries beneath it a traceable history of the journey by which it was made.

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Story 73 · The Broken Note

Mrinalini wishes to preserve the old songs of her grandmother, Janaki Devi. A note in the middle register of the harmonium is faulty, so the melody sometimes takes an unexpected turn and sometimes sounds incomplete. As the instrument is repaired, a question arises: would it be right to call the earlier, altered melody wrong and erase it? Grandmother and granddaughter record different performances of the song. Nachiketa, too, pays attention to the variation in the notes. Finally, all three sound recordings are preserved under the title 'The Song Between — Three Paths'. The instrument is mended, but the memory of the first performance is not effaced.

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Story 74 · The River's Other Name

On a new map at school, Nandini sees the river near her village represented by a single blue line and one official name. At home and by the ghats, however, she hears different local names for the same flowing water. With her teacher's help she records what boatmen, elders and people living beside the river say. She discovers that some names refer to seasonal forms of the water, some to branches of the current, and others to the identities used by boatmen. It would be wrong to treat all these local names as interchangeable. In the end, the line on the map no longer seems wrong to her; she understands only that a map and a flowing river serve different purposes.

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Story 75 · Two Kinds of Seed

Abhay wants to try a new variety of seed on the farm, while his grandmother has kept a bundle of the old seed. The differing soils of the raised homestead land and the low-lying fields, uncertain rainfall and standing water put both kinds to the test. Abhay records the measurements of cultivation, the timing, yield, taste and behaviour of the grain in his notebook. His grandmother's experience becomes an essential complement to his calculations. After the harvest, he sets aside both kinds of seed for the following year. The question is no longer simply ‘Which seed is better?’ but ‘For which field, in what season, and for whose use?’

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Story 76 · The Leaf Inside the Book

While cleaning old volumes in the town library, the staff discover a dried leaf pressed inside a book, along with a reader's note. Librarian Ramlochan Jha and his colleagues ask how the leaf can be removed to protect the book from damp without losing the reader's memory. They record the accession number, page number and time of discovery, then place the leaf in a separate envelope. A system is also devised for comments by new readers, so that the original pages will not be damaged. In the end, the old leaf and the new note are kept safely apart, while the book is opened once more for reading. The tale brings preservation and the memory of readers into harmony.

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Story 77 · Shared Hours on the Roof

On the shared roof of a four-storey residential building, people dry clothes, walk, play and maintain solar panels. Disputes arise over the space and time these different activities require. Rashmi and the other residents use measurements, chalk marks and conversation to work out a schedule. Permanent lines do not solve everything, because sunlight, people's needs and the weather keep changing. In the end, they adopt a flexible arrangement without permanently partitioning the roof. Rashmi comes to understand that a common space is governed less by written rules alone than by attentiveness and mutual accommodation.

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Story 78 · The Unfinished Play

Pupils rehearse a play for the school's annual theatre evening. The action falters at a scene where the response of a character named Meera has not been clearly written. Their teacher, Malati Jha, along with Ritu, Renu and the other students, tries different possibilities in performance. The meaning of the scene changes with the dialogue, the silence, the movement of a hand and the position of a performer on the stage. Rather than fill the unfinished passage with an arbitrary line, the pupils write down the different interpretations they have explored. The empty line in the script remains, but around it a path opens towards a new, fourth possibility. The tale affirms creative collaboration and the openness of meaning.

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Story 79 · A Share of the Moon

Through the narrow opening of sky between two houses in a lane, Naina and Ritu watch the moon. A plan to install a new water tank and pipes on one house threatens to block their view. The families discuss the need for a practical water supply alongside the girls' pleasure in watching the sky. By changing the position of the tank and the length of the pipes, they find a way to meet both needs. Later the moon moves along its course and out of the gap above the lane, but the passage to the sky remains open. The final thought is that even a small piece of the sky is no one's private property.

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Story 80 · The New Courtyard

On paper, the paved open area at the centre of a resettlement building is designated simply ‘Central Open Space’. In practice, residents from different floors walk through it, children play there and women carry on their household tasks. Isha, Nitu and the other children make a communal design in the courtyard, deliberately leaving an empty space in the middle. Discussion follows about the difference between administrative rules and the ways people actually use the place. Gradually the residents understand that a shared courtyard means not a claim by one family, but room left for everyone to pass through. At the end, Isha comes down the stairs and joins the others. No one has reserved a special spot for her, yet there is room for her all the same.

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Story 81 · The Thirty-First Bed

At the entrance to a women's night shelter, a sign gives the number of beds as thirty. Champa Devi knows each bed and the people who use it intimately. Yet although she works at the shelter, her own place to rest at night is not included among those thirty beds. When the need for an additional place is raised, the officials examine the records, bringing this omission in the count to light. Finally, a folding bed is set aside for use whenever needed. Champa does not have to sleep in it that night, but the presence of Bed Thirty-One comes not from someone's charity; it comes from correcting the institution's count.

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Story 82 · The Back Staircase

The main entrance to ‘Amaltas Building’ has a lift, but domestic worker Savita Devi and other service staff are assigned a rear ‘service route’. Darkness, stored objects and poor cleaning make its staircase hazardous every day. Savita places these difficulties before the owners and those responsible for managing the building. The obstruction on the second floor is removed, the light is replaced and the window cleaned. Even after the improvements, Savita knows that the upkeep of a route used daily cannot be ensured by a single inspection. In the end, she no longer has to feel along the wall in darkness at the turn of the stairs.

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Story 83 · The Night Slip

At the district hospital, the main visitors' register is closed at night, but patients' relatives and those bringing medicines and essential supplies continue to come and go. Devanath keeps track of their numbers and identities by means of a night slip. Difficulties arise over the figures written on the slips, the time of arrival and the many visitors who come for the same patient. Through discussion, the staff agree on a method that will safeguard necessary information without increasing reliance on unnecessary paperwork. The nighttime movements of relatives, including Nirmala Devi, are recorded. In the end, Devanath no longer needs to rely on his memory of faces to keep his own private reckoning.

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Story 84 · Two Buttons

Workers serving at a wedding hall are issued white kurtas and warned that their wages will be docked if any defect is found when the garments are returned. When two buttons of different colours are noticed on Suresh's kurta, he is accused of damaging it. Kamala Devi, who does the sewing, points out signs of an earlier repair, but the contractor's register contains no record of the garment's condition when it was issued. After discussion, each kurta is numbered and a new procedure begins for recording its condition at the time of collection. An old button will no longer become grounds for deducting a new worker's pay. The tale shows how workers' rights suffer when the history of an object goes unrecorded.

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Story 85 · Rent for a Shut Window

Sunayana does sewing work in her rented room. The daylight entering through its window is essential to her work with needle and thread. A new storeroom built by the landlord obstructs the window and blocks the light. Sunayana raises questions not only about the amount of rent but also about the actual conditions in which she lives and works. They discuss the window grille, security and an awning. A temporary reduction in rent is recorded to account for the loss of light, and the previous rent is restored after repairs. Sunayana realises that the value of a home lies not merely in the number of its bricks and walls, but also in the conditions that make it possible to live and work inside them.

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Story 86 · The Mark on the Brick

At the brick kiln, Kaushalya recognises two slanting lines made at the corner of a wet brick. The mark once identified the work of Raghuni's team, but as the years passed, wages and outstanding dues began to be calculated solely on the basis of that same mark. Kaushalya insists that the older batches, dates and differences among the workers be examined. When supporting records are found, some debts are acknowledged and entries without evidence are removed. The need becomes clear to record the date, batch and workers' names separately, alongside any new mark. The tale resists imprisoning a worker's identity for ever within a single sign on a brick.

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Story 87 · The Account of a Pocket

At Kusum Laundry, Jhuniya Devi checks pockets before washing clothes. An old rule requires that coins, papers and personal objects found in them be entered in a register. But the records make no distinction between describing an object and speculating about what it might mean, raising questions about customers' privacy. After a folded paper is found in Ravi's clothing, the laundry introduces a system for recording only the kind of object, the pocket and the number of the envelope in which it is kept. Beneath the old instruction, ‘Write down whatever is found’, Jhuniya adds a sentence defining its limits. In the end, the account concerns the objects, not the private thoughts of the people who own them.

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Story 88 · The Evening Chair

Outside a pharmacy stands a green chair labelled ‘For Customers’. Questions arise about who has the right to sit on it. Govind observes that the needs of tired customers, older people waiting for medicines and those who work in the shop change at different hours. The chair's fixed position also obstructs the passage and causes disputes. A folding seat is fitted to the wall, creating a new arrangement for its use. Sometimes a customer sits there, sometimes Govind, and sometimes someone else. In the end, the question of whose chair it is matters less than who is tired now, and who needs somewhere to sit.

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Story 89 · The Fifth Bucket

When water grows scarce at ‘Sharada Sadan’, a building with four flats, buckets are allotted according to the four households. The needs of caretaker Vasudev, his wife Sita and their daughter Rupa, who live in a room by the gate, are left out of the count. Vasudev asks not for pity but for a place within the rule. The residents discuss the distinction between drinking water, household entitlement and work performed for everyone. At last, a fifth bucket and the family's presence are entered in the records. The empty red bucket may lie overturned beside the stairs in the evening, but because it has been counted, three people are no longer invisible on paper.

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Story 90 · The Discarded Identity Card

At a packaging factory, Chanda Devi and eleven other contract workers lose their jobs on the same evening. They are instructed to surrender their identity cards as waste. Yet the final calculation of wages and outstanding payments remains unfinished, and without permission to enter through the factory gate they find it difficult to examine the records and claim what is owed. The workers point out this contradiction. With new slips and individual permissions, they gain access to the accounts office and complete the process for final payment. Their old identity cards may be surrendered, but the debt owed for the labour they performed does not disappear. The tale centres on the relationship between a worker's identity and the right to wages.

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Story 91 · Half a Signature

Jagarnath Paswan, Rehana and several other labourers are repairing the roof of the municipal council's old warehouse under contract. When a tool breaks and deductions are threatened, the register gives no clear answer as to whose responsibility the loss should be. Jagarnath stops midway through signing his name: he refuses to acknowledge an incorrect account without evidence. Anamika Jha, the engineer, proposes that the necessary particulars be recorded separately. New records are drawn up for the labour performed, the tools used and the reasons for any deductions. Payments now take a little longer to process, but a way has opened to prevent arbitrary cuts in wages. Jagarnath remembers the half-written signature as a sign of his right to stop and ask a question.

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Story 92 · The Locked Trunk

At the bus stand's lost-property room, preparations are under way to auction objects that have lain unclaimed for years. Malati and the other committee members open an old trunk and find clothing, tools, private photographs and letters. Can articles fit for public sale and papers holding someone's personal memories be disposed of under one and the same rule? Their inquiries lead them to the owner of a bag of tools, whose loss has cost him dearly in his livelihood. The rules for returning property and safeguarding private belongings are revised. The trunk is locked again, but a new path through the records has been opened between the objects shut inside and the people to whom they belong.

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Story 93 · Light for Hire

At the night market, every handcart vendor is charged the same fee in the name of electricity and supervision. Saroja and the other sellers object: their lamps, appliances and hours of use are by no means identical. Once private wiring, lighting along the common pathway and the electricity tariff have been examined, separate arrangements are made. Charges for private connections are linked to actual use, while the lamps in the central public passage remain lit for all. Some difficult questions persist even after the new system is tried, but the vendors now have a distinct right to switch their own lights on and off. The story seeks a measurable and just sharing of costs in place of equality that exists only on paper.

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Story 94 · The Small Padlock

In the shared premises of Madhavi Awas, several families keep personal papers and possessions in small locked boxes. After a suspicion is raised, there is a demand to open one of them; yet the contents include a notice of increased rent, jewellery and other private belongings. Rashmi, Reena, Sakina and their neighbours ask whether possession of a common key can ever confer the right to open someone's box in its owner's absence. They frame written rules governing keys and locks, the reason and time for opening a box, and the witnesses who must be present. The padlock remains just as small as before, but every act of unlocking it now calls for an entry in the register. The question is how to hold security and privacy in balance.

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Story 95 · Two Minutes Late

Naval, who delivers meals, faces a deduction of twenty rupees for supposedly reaching a customer two minutes late. The time he arrived at the building's gate, the time spent reaching the lift, the ringing of the bell and the customer's acceptance of the meal are recorded in different registers. Saroj, Mrinalini and others compare the entries and discover that the figures do not agree. The method of recording time is changed, and the deducted twenty rupees are returned to Naval. In the end, two entries are retained for the same delivery so that responsibility is determined by the actual handover, not by guesswork. Two minutes may be a very little time, yet their meaning can be immense when justice depends upon them.

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Story 96 · Weighing Wet Paddy

After the rain, the paddy is still damp when a dispute arises between Ramlochan and the labourer Phulmati over the weight of the sacks used in calculating wages. Wet grain loses weight as it dries; if the two parties weigh it in different conditions, an apparently equal account will be deceptive. Phulmati insists that it be weighed under the same conditions. Taking account of the needs of the field, the threshing ground and the storehouse, they begin recording wet and dry weights separately. At the end, the word ‘wet’ is written on the sack beside the date. Eighteen kilograms remains eighteen kilograms; what must now be stated alongside the figure is the essential truth of when, and in what condition, it was measured.

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Story 97 · The Empty Plate

Behind the wedding pavilion, the people preparing food for the guests labour day and night in the kitchen. Every arrangement is made for counting and feeding those invited, but the cooks, servers and cleaners are often left out when it comes to their own meals. Malati and her fellow workers challenge the omission. A new arrangement is made to record the cost and timing of meals and to enter the workers' names in the register. At last, plates of food are counted separately for Ganesh and the other workers. One plate is empty in the final scene because the person for whom it was meant has already gone, not because that person's right to a meal was forgotten. The plate is empty; the count is not.

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Story 98 · The Three-Rupee Receipt

The fee for using the public toilet at the bus stand is three rupees. Saroja, the attendant, notices that the money collected does not match the number of receipts issued. An inquiry reveals that payments from several users have been taken without receipts, or that the receipts have been entered under a different count. Ramesh Babu and the other workers devise separate records for the money received, small change, receipts and sums returned. They improve the system so that every payment leaves a trace, with no unnecessary deduction or suspicion. The last receipt, marked 'Reconciled', is carefully preserved. Transparency over so small a fee becomes a matter of trust for those whose work is tied to it.

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Story 99 · The Last Light

Kamli's work as a cleaner at the bus stand does not end when the last bus has departed. Clearing rubbish from the buses, securing the gate and switching off the lights are tasks whose finishing times differ. The clock specified in the contract does not fully account for her additional labour. Seema Jha, Raghunath and other workers examine the time register and record the difference between the last bus and the last task. They also revise the arrangements for keeping the necessary lights burning. In the closing scene, the lamps no longer needed are switched off, but the passage that must remain open is still illuminated. The time of Kamli's final task is preserved in the register beside her own name.

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Story 100 · Beyond the Count

In a survey of damage after the flood, the number of houses is being treated as the number of families. Yet one house may shelter several tenants, families with separate kitchens and people living there temporarily. Mrinalini and the survey team go from door to door to see how people actually live. They propose separate entries for damage to the walls, the owner's rights and the needs of the affected families. Once those omitted from the count are included, the figures for buildings and households no longer coincide. In the end, two different totals for the same place—the structures and the families living within them—are both accepted as correct. Beside the line drawn by the flood, another line appears on the page: a record of the people who are there.

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Story 101 · Beyond the Embankment

Fourteen years after the old village of Bahuara was displaced by an embankment, the people of New Bahuara begin debating where a shrine should be built. Raghunandan Jha and others argue over its location and who may claim authority over it. A register of turns for tending the shrine lamps, preserved by Devkali Devi, helps her grandson Chandan understand that the old shrine belonged exclusively to no caste or family: its care was the shared responsibility of every household. An open platform is built, with the names of old and new families entered together. Madhubala and her daughter Rani light the first lamp. In that flame, the memory of the former place is joined to the continuing communal life of the new village.

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Story 102 · The Vacant Post

The doctor's post at the Belahi health centre has remained vacant for five years. Jamuna Devi, who opens the centre each day, ties a knot in a length of rope in remembrance of every patient turned away for want of a doctor. On the day of an inspection a doctor is brought from another centre, but the chair stands empty again the following morning. Sita, Phulo and other villagers take the knotted rope to a public hearing; its two hundred and fourteen knots make the human suffering behind administrative neglect impossible to overlook. A doctor begins visiting twice a week. Jamuna does not undo the old knots: the pain people have already endured cannot simply be erased.

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Story 103 · The Voice of the Land

Dhaneshwar Sah produces a map of his property in order to fence off the ‘middle path’ linking the Sada hamlet of Hariharpur to the main road. The daily life of the settlement, travel during the rains and the need to carry sick people to safety all depend on that route. Jasoda Sada and the elderly Kusumi Sada bring forward memories of an old well and evidence of the path's bends and turns. As measurements, local testimony and collective appeals are weighed, the conflict between private ownership and customary public use becomes plain. Eventually a way is found to preserve the long-used path. The land speaks not only through the lines on a map, but through the feet of the people who have walked upon it.

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Story 104 · Half a Samosa

Jibachh and Basok are waiting for day labour at the bus stand. Between them they have money for only one samosa. The moment they cut it in half, the question of fairness entangles them both. The size of the pieces, the potato filling, the crisp pastry, their weight and ever more ingenious ways of dividing them only deepen the argument. The shopkeeper, a vegetable seller and other bystanders offer advice, but none can settle the matter. Once work is found, the two friends eat the samosa with laughter. The next day they buy two samosas, yet the question of which is bigger arises all over again. Amid hunger, the story catches both the warmth of friendship and the comic stubbornness of their demand for equality.

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Story 105 · The University of the Veranda

On the veranda beside the old post office, four unemployed young men—Naval, Ramakant, Sadan and Paramanand—hold debates on every conceivable subject and call their gathering a university. Ramakant receives an interview letter, but the lack of bus fare checks his excitement. The four take up paid manual work together. Their earnings meet the cost of the journey and reduce what they owe for tea to Malati Kaki. Their labour teaches them what long speeches had failed to teach. They even repair the veranda's leaking roof with their own hands. When Ramakant returns, the friends gather once more over tea; but debate and work now stand in a different relationship to one another.

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Story 106 · Love on Credit

In the credit ledger of Ramdev Sah's grocery shop, customers' accounts are kept alongside the ‘things they have said’. His daughter Kusum enters the debt of Madhav, a bicycle-repair worker, together with his proud and humorous remarks. Madhav wants to pay for the goods needed by his ailing mother; what he does not want is pity. Gradually, between Kusum and Madhav, an intimacy grows that cannot be measured in the columns of a debt ledger. When Madhav receives his wages, the financial balance returns to zero, but the words preserved in the old book remain. The blank pages of a fresh ledger, and the love still unspoken, hold open the possibility of what their relationship may become.

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Story 107 · A Free Cup of Tea

Every day at Belwa Chowk, Budhan Sah sets aside a free cup of tea for a stranger, on one condition: the visitor must give an honest opinion of it. The comments of unknown drinkers lead him to improve the benches, cleanliness and arrangements for the smoke in his shop. One day the road is closed and no newcomer arrives; the prepared tea stands there growing cold. At last a young woman travelling to Sonbarsa asks why the tea has been poured in advance. Taking her advice, Budhan begins keeping an empty cup ready and brewing fresh tea only when a stranger comes. The story finds wisdom in the willingness to hear criticism, and a natural grace in hospitality.

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Story 108 · The Old Man and the Radio

Every evening in Bardaha, Maheshwar Jha listens to the voice of radio announcer Shivnath Mishra. He is convinced that the announcer knows him personally. His grandson Nilu questions this certainty. When the radio batteries run out, the old man goes to another house in the hope of hearing the broadcast. Later a letter comes from the announcer, sending respectful greetings and mentioning Maheshwar's low wooden seat. For Nilu, it seems the first tangible proof of a connection. To Maheshwar, however, the sense of being known has been present in the voice all along. Unseen companionship, the sensitivity of listening and the differing outlooks of two generations meet in the tale.

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Story 109 · Sharing an Umbrella

Returning from the Sakri market, Lakhan, who mends shoes, finds that his umbrella has broken. In the rain, a young porter named Salim helps him hold it over them both. As they try playfully to divide its shelter equally, they get wet, laugh and learn something of one another's lives. Salim binds the damaged frame with his cord. When they part at Pipal Turn, their generosity gives rise to another dispute: which of them should take the umbrella home? Even after the umbrella has been repaired for the next market day, they continue to walk together. By then it is no longer the umbrella but their friendship that gives them a reason to share the road.

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Story 110 · The Five-Rupee King

Nine-year-old Gopi helps his mother tie bundles of greens and receives a five-rupee coin as his wages. At once he imagines himself a king; a crescent-shaped scratch on the coin becomes his royal emblem. His mother borrows it to make change, and the coin passes through the hands of Sito Kaki, the milkman, a mechanic and the postman before returning to Gopi. Following its travels, the boy begins to understand how money circulates, what it means to borrow, and what his claim to the coin can really be. Next morning, when Sito Kaki asks for change again, Gopi hands it over with a smile—but wants to know where it has been by evening.

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Story 111 · The Scent of Rice

Madhav is studying in Darbhanga and living in a rented room. Between his lessons and his poverty, he seldom lights his own cooking fire. The scent of rice rising from the pot of Kamala Kaki next door brings back the memory of his mother's home. Careful to preserve his self-respect, Kamala starts cooking Madhav's rice over the embers remaining in her hearth. He brings twigs for fuel, contributing his share. Gradually, the two pots on a single hearth become the centre of something like family affection. When rice from the newly harvested paddy arrives from the village, the fragrance of both homes seems to mingle. Madhav goes home for the holidays, but a place for his little cooking pot is kept ready.

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Story 112 · The Grammar of a Love Letter

Deepak comes to his teacher, Ramanand Jha, asking him to correct the grammar of a letter to his beloved Sugni. The teacher tells him that rather than filling the page with extravagant promises about the moon and stars, life and death, and everlasting love, he should speak truthfully of what he has seen and heard. Deepak writes of Sugni's patience, their meeting in the library and his own feelings, plainly acknowledged. He also recognises her freedom to choose whether to reply. What began as an exercise in language becomes a conversation founded on respect. After Sugni answers, the prospect of a five-minute meeting on Sunday finds its way even onto the teacher's market shopping list.

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Story 113 · The Betel-Seller Philosopher

Badri Sah, who sells betel at Pipal Chowk, listens to people's troubles without immediately offering advice. As he prepares a paan, he asks simply, ‘What can be done at this moment?’ The question helps customers separate what can be acted upon from the rest of their worries. Then Badri's landlord gives him notice to vacate the shop he has occupied for seventeen years, and he finds himself at a loss. Friends and customers help him find another place. He comes to understand that five minutes may not yield an answer; they may instead give someone the courage to take the next step. At his new shop, he sends a boy anxious about his examinations home to study.

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Story 114 · The Rented Dog

Mahendra the tailor worries about the customers' garments and sewing machine kept in his house, but cannot afford a watchdog. Abdul Chacha offers to let his dog Kalu sleep on Mahendra's veranda at night, in return for a bath once a week. Carrying his old sack, Kalu begins moving regularly between the two households. Sometimes he fails to stop a goat; at other times he barks a warning before a gate falls. Later Mahendra can afford to buy a dog of his own, but he does not end the affectionate arrangement with Kalu. The animal has found two homes, and both families have found a way of helping one another.

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Story 115 · A Feast with Empty Pockets

Four friends decide to celebrate Lallan's success in a training examination with a feast, though none of them has any money. Lallan, Phekan, Jamil and Bhola are determined to earn their food by their own effort rather than ask for it. They receive guavas for gathering fruit that has fallen from a vendor's cart, and roasted gram for freeing a wheel of a handcart. They also help carry a municipal cleaner's basket. Beside the pond, they spread out their feast of guavas, gram, salt and water drawn from the public tap. Its cost is nothing, but the company is rich in friendship, work, self-respect and laughter.

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Story 116 · The Broken Umbrella Association

Caught in the rain, Shivnath the tailor, Karim the bicycle mechanic and Jagdish the sack-weigher possess three umbrellas, each broken in a different way. By taking the cloth from one, the ribs from another and the shaft from the third, they assemble a green-and-blue umbrella. But how can three men share its shelter fairly? Laughing as they get wet, they agree to change the person holding it every twenty steps. The following day they discuss the repair and ownership of their ‘Broken Umbrella Association’. In the end, the umbrella belongs to no one alone: it becomes a common resource, available to whichever of them needs it.

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Story 117 · The Forgetful Lover

Nandu has enormous faith in his memory, but hears the date of Madhuri's birthday as the seventeenth instead of the twenty-seventh. Ten days early, he arrives with jalebis and a thick-bound notebook to offer his congratulations. Madhuri and her mother laughingly explain the error. Madhuri writes both his mistaken date and her real birthday in the notebook. On the twenty-seventh Nandu comes again, this time without a present, but on the right day. Kheer, laughter and the neat entries in the notebook suggest that in love, attentiveness, humility and the willingness to check a fact matter more than a boastful memory.

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Story 118 · The Barber Who Charged Nothing

Mangal the barber insists on cutting his old friend Dhiru's hair for nothing. Dhiru wants to pay, and teases him for his painstaking slowness and his endless ‘philosophy’. Taking special care, Mangal works around the whorl on the right side and combs the hair so that an old scar is concealed. In return Dhiru tightens the loose arm of the shop chair, but neither treats the exchange as a matter of wages or a customer's account. Dhiru praises his friend's skill, and the following day other customers begin to admire it too. Unpriced kindness between friends, pride in good work and affectionate banter fill the little shop.

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Story 119 · Grandmother's Mobile Phone

Dhanwanti Dadi cannot make sense of the symbols and buttons on her mobile phone, though her granddaughter Anima patiently teaches her again and again. The grandmother cares less about counting the numbers on a screen than about hearing people's voices, understanding their worries and asking after one another. One day the phone stops working. Family members and acquaintances begin seeking one another out in other ways, and new opportunities for conversation arise. When a new cable is fitted, Dhanwanti agrees that a mobile phone can bring people together—but sometimes it needs to fall silent as well. Gentle humour reveals the distance between an instrument of communication and a living human bond.

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Story 120 · One Plate of Pakoras

After market day, five friends gather at Ramcharit's shop and order one plate of pakoras. Who is to eat the eleventh one? As they debate the question, they begin recalling favours done for one another: someone minded the shop, someone taught a child, someone helped during an illness. While these debts of gratitude are counted, the pakoras grow cold. Ramcharit's daughter Gudiya settles the argument with practical good sense. A second plate is deliberately prepared with eleven pakoras, and the extra one is put aside for Gudiya. The joke lies in their discovery that the worth of friendship cannot be calculated as if it were a bill.

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Story 121 · A Pair of Sandals

Nandkishore and Ramvilas, who have come to worship at the Shiva temple with their families, do not know each other. Yet both families have left almost identical black sandals outside. In the rain and the press of the crowd, their footwear gets mixed up. A strand of blue thread and a round mark on a sole help them restore each pair to its owner. As they wait beneath the eaves for the rain to stop, the two families become acquainted. A month later they meet again at the market; this time, threads of different colours distinguish the sandals. With the confusion over the footwear resolved, strangers have become familiar faces.

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Story 122 · The Richest Man in the House

Jagdish Jha earns little from binding old books, yet travellers, students and acquaintances come and go freely through his home. His daughter Muniya, asked to write an essay on ‘The Richest Man in the House’, wants to know what wealth means. Though there is little food in the household, visitors contribute their own provisions and labour, and a meal is prepared together. Muniya sees that a home with just four plates gives shelter to many people. In her essay, her father's generosity becomes a new measure of riches. That night another traveller arrives seeking a place to stay, and the mat is spread once more on the veranda.

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Story 123 · Savings of Laughter

Sarita has been given a school essay on savings in the home. In an old account book belonging to her grandfather, Ramlochan Mishra, she finds a history of money painstakingly put aside and repeatedly exhausted by medicine, a daughter's wedding and repairs to the thatched roof. Her grandparents, Ramlochan and Surji, resolve to begin saving again, however modestly. As they discuss a cooperative account, rupees gradually accumulate in a small brass box. Sarita writes that money may rise and fall, but the laughter shared by the family has endured all along. In her grandparents' new savings live both financial caution and the stubborn courage to carry on.

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Story 124 · The Key

After seven years in a rented house, Madhav Jha is moving with his family to a new home. A locked wooden chest in the old room, and the unfamiliar key that accompanies it, have always seemed mysterious. The landlord, Shashidhar Babu, explains that the chest is a remembrance of his late wife; its contents were distributed long ago. As Madhav takes his leave, Shashidhar gives him both the chest and the key. In their new home, Madhav's daughter Meera places her drawing notebook inside it as its first possession. The once-empty chest becomes a bridge from the memories of the old house to those of a new family.

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Story 125 · Ten Minutes

Avinash is waiting to catch the train for his training course, but his teacher is still bringing the corrected certificate of his date of birth. Only ten minutes remain at the station. Nearby, Kaushalya Devi is watching for her son. The two pass the waiting time by keeping an eye on each other's belongings and anxieties. As the teacher's arrival draws near, anticipation, the train's whistle and the rush to board all gather force together. With the necessary certificate and his luggage in hand, Avinash manages to begin his journey at the last moment. The story finds, within ten fleeting minutes, the lasting memory of help exchanged between strangers.

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Story 126 · The Last Customer

Jairam the barber is closing his shop when a young man named Shashikant arrives as his last customer. The young man has lost his wallet, but Jairam shaves him without payment and asks only that, when the chance comes, he do some small kindness for another person free of charge. The next day Jairam has business at an office concerning an important file of his own. There he meets Shashikant, who helps unfold the complicated paperwork and move the matter forward by the proper procedure. Afterwards the young man offers to pay for the shave, but Jairam refuses to turn kindness into a reciprocal account. In the final scene, he welcomes another customer who has brought too little money.

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Story 127 · The Broken Watch

Amresh takes Madhavi's old wristwatch, which has stopped, to Dinanath's repair shop. Its hands are fixed at sixteen minutes past five. Gradually it emerges that at precisely that moment Madhavi's father, Raghunath, had for the first time allowed Amresh to hang his umbrella on a peg inside the house, treating him no longer as an outsider. Madhavi had understood that small gesture of acceptance as an opening towards their marriage for love, and had deliberately stopped the watch. When it is repaired, Amresh leaves its scratch untouched. Later, as talk of their marriage begins in Raghunath's house, the memory of five sixteen acquires a new meaning.

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Story 128 · The Sweetmeat Box

To convey her wishes on a special occasion, Shailaja buys Nirmala an expensive, elaborately decorated box of saffron-and-makhana sweets. Without anyone opening it, the box passes from one household to another as a gift until, at last, it returns to Shailaja's own home. Nirmala and Shailaja recognise the absurdity: amid the glittering packaging and the prestige of giving presents, nobody has actually eaten the sweets. Finally they open the box and share its contents. Shailaja's daughter Ira takes the empty box to keep thread in. The travelling gift becomes a gentle comedy about the difference between display, affection and the real use of a thing.

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Story 129 · The Small Advertisement

Niranjan is looking for work and places a small, inexpensive advertisement in the newspaper. Forced to cut down the number of words, he ends up trimming even the description of the work he can do. Reading the advertisement, an old friend, Harinath, comes to see him. Eight years earlier Niranjan had used his savings to pay Harinath's training fees. Now Harinath returns the amount of that old debt, and their friendship is renewed. Niranjan goes back to place another advertisement for work, but he has understood that the first small notice found more than employment: it also recovered a forgotten friendship and the memory of a debt.

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Story 130 · The Blue Pen

On the day of the examination, Mithilesh is anxious. His friend Raghav lends him a ‘lucky’ blue pen, the one with which Raghav had previously succeeded. Behind the pen's reputation lie Mithilesh's help and the many hours they have practised together. When the pen malfunctions during the examination and has to be set right, it becomes clear that effort and confidence matter more than an object. Mithilesh is selected when the results are announced. Raghav offers him the pen again, but Mithilesh says that it wrote one mark; he himself wrote all the remaining answers. Beneath the appearance of good luck stand a friend's support and his own labour.

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Story 131 · The Wooden Horse

Bholanath the carpenter makes his son Santosh a horse from jackfruit wood, fitting it with a neem-wood wheel whose sound is unlike that of the others. When Bholanath falls ill, Santosh sells the horse to Habib Miyan at the market to buy medicine. His father understands the sacrifice, yet also teaches him that work ought to fetch its proper price. Later Habib Miyan returns the horse in exchange for four spinning tops. Santosh keeps it carefully on the household tool chest and lets the other children play with it as well. In this little toy are joined the value of labour, the needs of a family and the pull of memory.

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Story 132 · The Sewing Machine

Leela earns money for the household with her sewing machine. An intended birthday gift for her husband, Harinarayan, the cost of a motor for the machine and an immediate shortage of money together create a difficulty. Leela pawns the working machine to raise the sum she needs, and a transaction involving parts from an old, useless machine also takes place. Harinarayan is startled at first, but money earned from sewing enables them to redeem the machine. Badri the mechanic fits the motor, reducing Leela's dependence on the foot treadle. A red-bordered gamchha, the pawn receipt and the machine's sound bear witness to the labour husband and wife share.

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Story 133 · A Pair of Shoes

Naval sells his old black shoes to raise the money needed for his sister Mrinal's college admission. A crescent-shaped stain of blue ink distinguishes the pair. After enrolling, Mrinal discovers what he has sacrificed. With part of her scholarship money, she buys back the very shoes from Rahim's shop. All the while her brother has been managing with sandals. The shoes' return is more than the recovery of a possession: it expresses the mutual respect between a sister's education and a brother's love. The blue mark remains a memory shared by them both.

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Story 134 · The Lost Purse

Raghuvir, a rickshaw driver, has had his driving permit withheld because repairs were lacking; he is also worried about the fees for his daughter Anushka's education. When he returns a passenger's lost purse, he discovers that it belongs to Ashok Jha, an official in the very office where Raghuvir's papers are held up. Raghuvir seeks neither special advantage nor a large reward in exchange. He completes the repairs and pays the penalty required by the rules. The official, for his part, restores the permit without favouritism and pays the five rupees still due for the rickshaw fare. The story honours the self-respect that refuses to bargain honesty away for personal gain.

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Story 135 · The Rented Room

Suman Mandal, a student in teacher training, has rented a room from Harimohan Thakur for three years. Doubts about an extra amount in the rent account, together with financial pressure, lead him to move elsewhere. When the time comes to pay his examination fee, he discovers that Harimohan had kept money aside for him and already paid the fee. Generous though the act was, doing it without asking Suman has wounded the young man's right to make his own decisions. Each comes to recognise his mistake. Suman passes the examination and begins to save separately for future fees.

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Story 136 · The Nameless Parcel

Useful parcels begin arriving at Shivkant Mishra's house without the sender's name. The family is surprised, but suspicion also grows, for the packages contain precisely the things needed within the household. At last Shivkant recognises that the sender is his son Nandu, who works the night shift in the goods depot at Darbhanga. From his earnings Nandu has been sending his mother a shawl, materials for house repairs and other necessities. He left off his name to avoid unwanted questions about his poverty and uncertain employment. His father now understands that his son's habit of sleeping late is not laziness but the consequence of working through the night.

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Story 137 · Behind the Photograph

While sorting through the possessions of an old house, Udayan and Swarnalata find a line written on the back of a photograph. Their elderly aunt Vimala tells them how, on the night of a flood, a woman named Kaushalya came by boat and helped at a birth, saving both their mother and the newborn Harinarayan. The family has almost forgotten the woman's place in its history. They make contact with Kaushalya's family, and the photograph is not sold. On the veranda, her name and her contribution are displayed beside it. Before the house itself is repaired, an injustice in its memory is set right.

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Story 138 · Two Lamps

For Diwali, Nitin buys two earthen lamps with the wages he has saved. One is for the doorway at home; the other is for the solitary watchman at the cremation ghat, whose lantern has broken. When Nitin reaches the ghat, he discovers that the watchman is in fact his father, Raghunath. The family has never spoken openly about the harsh work Raghunath does at night. Knowing who the watchman is, Nitin begins to understand his father's labour and reticence in a new light. His mother Malati has known the truth all along. The two lamps, one at the door and one at the ghat, become signs of light at home and respect for unseen labour.

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Story 139 · The Saree Bought on Credit

Wanting to look her best at her niece's wedding, Shailbala buys a red-bordered saree for four thousand two hundred rupees, payable in instalments. Long after the wedding, the interest and unpaid balance weigh upon the household's expenses for medicine, food and education. Over three years, she wears the saree only a few times; even in the wedding photographs, hardly anyone particularly remembers it. At last, on a day marked by neither invitation nor celebration, Shailbala puts it on and goes to the market. With that quiet decision she reclaims her right to an object bought for other people's eyes.

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Story 140 · Five Dhurs of Land

The brothers Raghunath and Jaynath are quarrelling over the division of five dhurs of ancestral land. Because the little plot lies beside the main road, its value has risen, bringing talk of measurements, bricks and the courts. Then a notice of road widening makes it clear that almost the whole piece will be taken for the road. The brothers begin dealing together with the documents and the compensation process. For Deepak, who had dreamed of opening a shop on the land, Jaynath proposes a different site of his own. As the dispute over ownership of five dhurs subsides, the bonds of brotherhood slowly return.

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Story 141 · The Host

Raghunath Chaudhary, a respected man in the village, resolves to give a lavish feast to mark the opening of his new veranda. In his desire to uphold the renown of a feast once given by his father, the guest list and the expense keep growing. After the meal, he first pays the cooks and labourers their wages, but instead of a surplus, debt remains against the household. Raghunath makes a blue ledger of the expenses and begins repaying them by instalments. Later, when another host asks his advice, he says that invitations should match one's means. The tale lays bare the distance between prestige enjoyed for a day and the burden borne for months.

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Story 142 · The New Mobile Phone

Aniruddh, a student, is embarrassed when his friends laugh at his old mobile phone. He spends money sent from home for essential needs on a new one. The instalments on the phone, combined with a delay in income, prevent him from paying his examination fee. The window closes on the appointed day, and he cannot sit the examination. At first he wants to conceal what happened from his father, but finally tells him everything. His father advises him to look towards the next opportunity. Aniruddh sells the new device, keeps aside the fee for his next examination and returns to using his old phone.

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Story 143 · The Dowry Fan

Beneath the standing fan brought from Madhu's parental home at her wedding is pasted a label reading ‘Madhu Wedding’. Because of that label, an ordinary useful object becomes a reminder of dowry and prestige. Disagreements over repairs, the debt incurred by her parents and pride in her husband's household widen the distance between the two families. Later Madhu carries the same fan into the stifling kitchen for her mother-in-law, Shanti Devi, who is sweating as she works. The label remains, but the breeze belongs to everyone's need. In the end, the fan's use proves greater than the quarrels surrounding it.

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Story 144 · The Grand Gate

Nandkishore Yadav has a tall, imposing gate built at the front of his house, although the old roof leaks. The strip of cement beneath the new gate obstructs the flow of rainwater, causing water to gather in the courtyard and the house to leak still more badly. Listening at last to the concerns of his wife Vimala and daughter Gauri, Nandkishore has the roof and the drain repaired, one after the other. The gate's ornamentation remains unfinished, but the roof is sound and the water has a way out. The safety and usefulness of the home take precedence over outward display.

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Story 145 · The Certificate of Honour

The writer Mahendranath Jha receives an invitation to a literary award ceremony, but he must himself bear the costs of the programme, souvenir volume, travel and food. He is presented with a certificate of honour, yet is given no opportunity to read his new story, and the title of his book is misspelt in the published introduction. Returning home, he sees that the wall on which he might hang the certificate is damp and the roof still needs mending. He pays the craftsman what he is owed and returns to revising his new story. The enduring work of literature matters more here than the outward glitter of honour.

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Story 146 · One Plate Less

At Suchitra's wedding feast, a leaf plate is deliberately removed from the row. Her niece Maithili notices the absence, bringing unequal treatment and social distance into view. When a temporary kitchen wall begins to give way in the night's rain, the people and children placed in danger are saved through help that alters the meaning of old divisions. Later four leaf plates are laid in one row and food is served. At dawn Maithili asks whether they had not set out one plate less the day before. Ramlochan agrees that they must count again.

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Story 147 · An Address in the City

Amresh, who lives in the city, is ashamed to write his full address in the village of Sonbarsa. On an employment application he gives ‘Vidyapati Nagar’ as both his present and permanent address. During verification the inconsistency in the documents emerges, and because it is not corrected in time he loses an opportunity. When he returns to the village, a letter bearing his complete address reaches him without difficulty. He realises that hiding one's identity creates obstacles rather than advantages. In his next application he writes down both addresses clearly: the village as his permanent home and the city as his present residence.

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Story 148 · The Smile in the Photograph

After the death of their father, Vinod Babu, his four children have a group photograph taken during the shraddha rites, smiling together. On social media the picture becomes an emblem of ‘ideal family unity’. Yet they disagree about the house keys, the property and the responsibility of care. Their youngest sister Sudha had remained at home to look after their father through the last year of his illness, but no account of money includes the time she gave him. Later the family begins keeping a separate record of the care actually provided. The smiles in the photograph lasted five moments; the need for a just conversation among them remained long afterwards.

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Story 149 · The Feast Paid for by Debt

After Jagesar Mandal dies, his son Harinarayan takes a loan under social pressure to provide the customary feast on the thirteenth day. The money set aside for his sister Nilima's education is spent as well. People praise the feast for a few days, but without money for travel and study materials, Nilima loses an academic term. Harinarayan repays the loan through an advance on the paddy crop and instalments. Nilima begins saving again, and only then can her studies move forward. The passing acclaim won by social display is measured against the lasting educational loss suffered by a young woman.

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Story 150 · The Hired Car

For Ravi's wedding, Nandkishore hires a gleaming, expensive motorcar to display the family's prestige, and covers up the sign identifying it as a hired vehicle. On the way with the wedding procession, the car breaks down. To save time, they bring an ordinary jeep on which the name of the rental service is plainly displayed. The wedding goes ahead without difficulty, and before long no one is talking about the car at all. Instead, an additional cleaning charge is imposed because the sign had been covered. In the end, Nandkishore accepts the ordinary jeep without embarrassment.

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Story 151 · Like Gold

When Raghunath Jha and his family discover glittering ornaments in an old trunk, they take them for his mother's genuine gold. Anxiety over keeping the jewellery safe soon gives rise to keys, locks and suspicions about how it might be divided; even his wife Pushpa becomes the object of an unfounded accusation. An examination reveals that the ornaments are not gold at all but old imitation jewellery. The family realises how deeply the lure of a little glitter has damaged their trust. In the end, one necklace is given to the school for a play, the children amuse themselves with the bangles, and the box is left open once more.

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Story 152 · Ten Kilograms of Rice

At the panchayat's distribution of ten-kilogram rice rations, Malati Devi and other families are photographed holding the same sack, one after another. As soon as each photograph is taken, the sack is withdrawn; in its place the recipient receives only a slip marked ‘Received’. A little boy, Chhotu, recognises a cut in the blue thread on the sack and has saved five grains that fell from it. With the help of the teacher Ramanand, the discrepancy between the photographs and the warehouse register comes to light. An inquiry reveals that assistance was recorded as fully distributed on paper although no actual distribution had taken place. The child's close observation exposes the falsehood concealed behind an official display.

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Story 153 · Expensive Shoes

For an interview for promotion, Ram Babu buys a shining new pair of shoes costing two thousand eight hundred rupees, having been told that the first impression begins at one's feet. At the interview, however, the seal on an old training certificate is indistinct, and a verified copy is demanded. He hurries to the distant training centre and returns with the necessary document, but the delay in entering his papers keeps his name off the promotion list. The expensive shoes chafe his heels and are left lying in a trunk. Set against regulations, documents and the worth of actual work, their outward polish proves useless.

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Story 154 · The Empty Envelope

While counting the gift envelopes from his daughter Gauri's wedding, Harinath finds an empty one bearing Ramvilas's name. Suspicion stirs in the family. Later, however, it emerges that on the wedding night Harinath himself had taken three thousand rupees from it to save the electrical arrangements and had forgotten to record the expenditure. Several other envelopes, too, had been opened to meet immediate needs. He tells the family not to put down imagined amounts merely to fill the accounts. Without telling Ramvilas of the incident, Harinath enters the actual expense in the register. The empty envelope becomes a sign of the costs behind a celebration's glitter, and of the uncertainty of memory.

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Story 155 · The Invitation

Every neighbour receives an invitation to Saumya's wedding except Shashibhushan and Malati, whose closeness to the family goes back many years. They feel that their bond has been slighted. An outside organiser has taken charge of the wedding, and the printed-card list distinguishes guests from organisers in a way that leaves out several people bound to the family by affection. Madanmohan later comes in person to apologise. Malati understands that a printed card cannot be the complete measure of a relationship, although the hurt of being overlooked is real. She places the new invitation in the old box of memories, under the name ‘Mistake’.

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Story 156 · The Man with the Umbrella

Ramnarayan has furnished a new drawing room for receiving guests. When Raghunath, an old servant, arrives in the rain with wet feet and a patched umbrella, he is made to feel hesitant about sitting inside. Then rainwater begins to drip through the roof. Turning his old umbrella upside down and hanging it beneath the leak, Raghunath channels the water into a bucket. Most of the drawing room's furnishings are saved. The household welcomes him inside with respect. The next day his umbrella hangs not against the outer wall but from a new peg inside the drawing room.

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Story 157 · The Number Plate

Ramakanth spends extra money unofficially to secure the special number ‘7777’ for his new car. The four digits become a badge of prestige. When the car is involved in an accident during the rain, he drives away in fear of the crowd instead of stopping to help the injured elderly man. A student, Neeraj, has remembered the car's distinctive number and gives evidence to the police. The number leads to the identification of both vehicle and driver. The very digits chosen for display become evidence of responsibility.

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Story 158 · The Village Stage

A stage bearing the words ‘One Village, One Honour’ is erected on the school ground. Phekan, who does the bamboo work, and his son Kedar, who manages the sound system, labour over the event. Yet when the feast begins, the workers and people from the settlement across the river are seated in a separate row behind a wall. Eating with his own family, Kedar sees the contradiction between the stage's proclamation of unity and the discrimination practised below it. That evening, while dismantling the stage, he winds the rope that had divided the dining rows around the banner reading ‘One Village, One Honour’.

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Story 159 · The Girl by the Window

Fifteen-year-old Madhavi's education has been stopped after Class Eight because the new school is three kos away. From her window she watches the girls who were once her classmates ride to school on their bicycles. With the help of Raghunath, who delivers letters, she writes to her former headmistress to ask how she might enrol. A reply arrives, and little by little her father agrees to let her continue her studies. As Madhavi sets out with him to obtain the necessary certificate, Raghunath asks why the window is empty today. ‘Today,’ she answers, ‘I am on the road.’

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Story 160 · The Migrant's Daughter

Harinarayan works in a warehouse across the border in Biratnagar and seldom returns home, but he continues to send letters to his daughter Kusum. Kusum wants to hear not merely news of money but stories of her father's labour, the people at the warehouse and the life he leads. She questions the stories he writes, and his replies acquire the names of characters, their feelings and fresh details of the workers' dignity. When he comes home, father and daughter become companions in storytelling. He begins a tale of two shoes touching the different soils on either side of a border, leaving space for Kusum to write what happens next.

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Story 161 · An Unfinished Song

An old village song sung during rice transplantation lives on in Grandmother Kaushalya's memory, but Jhunki, who used to sing its answering voice, is no longer there. Her granddaughter Mrinal wishes to arrange the song anew. Grandmother objects to filling the gap with invented words, for it was once a song made by the voices of two women together. Mrinal first preserves the original melody and the silence that falls within it; only then does she add the voice of her own generation as a separate part. The incompleteness is not erased. Instead, it becomes a space in which the time that has passed and the present can speak to one another.

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Story 162 · A Letter by the River

After the flood, the river changes its course and separates the friends Madhavi and Sudha. They keep in touch by leaving messages scratched on pieces of clay near an old earthen pot on the riverbank. Once, when a message breaks, only the words ‘I no longer’ survive, causing alarm; the complete sentence had been ‘I am no longer afraid.’ When the river shifts its banks again, the two find another, safer place to leave their messages without putting themselves in danger. The letters remain a way of staying connected, but they also teach the care needed to understand the whole of another person's words.

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Story 163 · The Little Servant

In one household, the increasing height of a young boy, Ishan, is recorded with marks on a wooden doorframe. Kanhaiya, a boy of the same age who works in the house, makes marks for his own height on the opposite side. At first the family notices only Ishan's marks. Kanhaiya's growing body, his labour and his childhood remain out of sight. When the doorframe is to be replaced, the marks on both sides come into view. A piece of the old wood is preserved, and the stories of the two boys growing up can be seen together.

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Story 164 · Mother's Trunk

After Lalita Devi's death, her three daughters, Manjari, Renu and Tara, open their mother's old trunk. Inside are separate unfinished letters in which she had tried to speak to each daughter of things left unsaid, of her mistakes and her love. At first the sisters understand the incomplete words in different ways. Then they begin to talk about their mother's life and the distance that has grown between themselves. None adds words of her own to complete the missing lines of the letters. What they find unfinished in the trunk gives them a chance to say what still remains unsaid in their living relationships.

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Story 165 · The School Courtyard

A proposal is made to close the village school because so few children attend it. The teacher Ratneshwar wants to save it, but enrolment has declined. Subhadra Devi, a woman of the village, learns to write her name in an evening class and urges families to send their children to the school. New enrolments rise, and the proposal for closure is halted. The school courtyard is no longer a place for children's lessons alone: it also makes room for adults learning their letters and for the village's shared responsibility.

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Story 166 · The Vermilion Box

Revati finds an old vermilion box belonging to her grandmother Kamala Devi and becomes curious about it. Grandmother recalls the day she removed the vermilion after her husband's death, when her little daughter Malati stopped short at the sight of her mother's altered appearance, barely recognising her. The pain between society's rules of widowhood and the intimate recognition of a mother by her daughter has been held in this small box. Grandmother does not conceal the memory; she shares it with Revati. In doing so, she turns the box from an object of silence into a bridge of understanding between generations.

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Story 167 · The Swing in the Tree

When Kusum brings her daughter Mansi to her parental home, memories return of swinging from the old mango tree. But the tree's weakened branch and roots have become a danger to people's safety. Grandmother Sharda recalls the old swing and the memories bound to the tree, yet she does not believe they should take risks to preserve it. The tree is removed, and the family plants a sapling in its place. They keep the swing's rope, waiting for green shade in the future and for another generation's games.

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Story 168 · The Clay Flute

Neelu, a potter's son, makes a flute of clay, but one of its notes sounds different from the customary pitch. At first the music teacher Devvrat considers it a flaw. By changing the way he blows and places his fingers, Neelu shows that he can draw the intended melody from the very same flute. The teacher learns that the design of an instrument is not all that matters: the musician's ear and willingness to experiment matter too. By exchanging bamboo and clay flutes, traditional knowledge and the child's new experiments enrich one another.

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Story 169 · A Name

Anshu, an adopted child, learns that he used to be called ‘Kush’ in the home where he first lived. He wants to know whether keeping the memory of that earlier name would somehow diminish his love for his new family. At first his mother Shailaja is uneasy, fearing that two names might open a distance within their sense of belonging. Her son's simple curiosity helps her understand that a present bond can grow strong without erasing the memory of an earlier life. At last she calls him ‘Kush’; Anshu is accepted with both his names.

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Story 170 · The Evening Lesson

Nayan tries to write down ‘The Bird in Search of Shade’, a story he has heard his grandmother Sarayu tell. She wants him to preserve not only the events but also the meaning carried by her speech, pauses and tone. During these evening lessons their roles change: Nayan teaches his grandmother to write her name, while she teaches him the subtleties of an oral tale. On the slate appear the names of both generations alongside the words of the story. Reading, writing and listening become a shared education in mutual respect.

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Story 171 · The Fair at the Border

At a fair in Janakpur, a little girl named Rani loses her mother in the crowd. Manju, Devesh and their daughter Gauri find her; later Savita, Ramesh and their son Abhay, who have come from the Indian side, join the search. The clues to the child's home are two cows, a red wall and a mark in the shape of a white flower that remain in her memory. Together the two families take her home. Sitting beside Gauri from Nepal and Abhay from India, Rani identifies herself simply: ‘I belong here.’ Through the help of strangers from both sides of the border, the child returns safely home.

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Story 172 · The Neem Tree's Shade

When Jamuna Kaki, who works in a household, stays away for several days with a fever, the family begins to understand the true extent of her daily labour. Sitting in the shade of the neem tree, she had listened to the children's worries, looked over papers bearing poor marks and taken care of countless little matters. During her absence the family learns to divide the work among themselves. On her return she is paid her full month's wages, for no account of her stated duties could measure all she had contributed. Jamuna Kaki urges them to keep sharing their responsibilities. The neem's shade becomes a place of partnership and respect.

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Story 173 · The Paper Boat

After their mother's death, the brother Naresh and sister Sudha divide their share of the old family home. A quarrel arises over a rope stretched across the courtyard and the division of a drain. A paper boat floating in the rainwater reminds them of a little bridge they built together as children. Memory does not settle the question of land, but it makes the value of a common passage visible once more. They agree to have the land measured again by a surveyor and to leave a public way six hands wide, with an outlet for the water, between their plots. Between the separate homes, a shared course for the water survives.

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Story 174 · Silence

Although Sarojini Devi and her daughter-in-law Rita live in the same house, they convey their words to one another through Manoj. Daily criticism and embarrassment have built a wall of silence between them. When Rita's daughter Aditi falls ill, the two women have to care for her together through a night at the hospital. Amid fear, exhaustion and worry, they speak directly to each other for the first time. Aditi's condition stabilises and they return home. The old distance does not disappear at once, but Manoj's mediation is no longer needed for every small question.

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Story 175 · The Postcard

Schoolchildren write postcards to people living in an old-age home. Nayan's card reaches Gomati Devi, whose name awakens in Nayan's grandmother Bhavani Devi the memory of an old relationship. The two women have been separated for years. Through Nayan, Bhavani Devi writes a letter in her own trembling hand, and at last they meet. Together they send Nayan a postcard bearing the words ‘We have found the way back.’ A few handwritten words break a long silence and reopen the path between them.

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Story 176 · The Flower at the Lattice Window

On his way to school each day, Divakar sees a flower placed in the lattice window of an old house and begins to attach a meaning to his day according to its colour. Kamala Devi, the elderly woman who lives inside, starts to notice the unfamiliar boy's curiosity. On a day when no flower appears, Divakar grows worried, and little by little they come to know each other. The conversations that begin through the window ease the old woman's solitude. One day the flower is no longer at the window but on a low seat by the door, because Kamala Devi can now walk that far. Understanding the joy of this small change, Divakar continues on his way.

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Story 177 · First Earnings

After twelve days' work in a bookshop, Manjari receives her first wages: one thousand six hundred and eighty rupees. She wants to buy new sandals for her mother, Sulochana Devi, but her mother has only the damaged strap of the old pair repaired. She insists that the money be set aside first for her daughter's college admission and books. Within Manjari, the desire to give a present and the need to continue her studies live side by side. Her mother's modest repair and the books in her daughter's bag together give the first earnings their meaning.

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Story 178 · The Returning Song

Returning from far away after seven years, Raghav sees the altered roads, houses and pond of his village and feels like a stranger in the world he once knew. An old rice-transplanting song, sung by Phulkumari Kaki as she winnows paddy, brings back an incomplete line from his childhood. Kaki and Raghav's mother put the different lines of the song right, laughing together as they do so. Raghav makes no decision to settle in the village, but he understands that even after the physical paths have changed, the voices of people and the ways they answer one another endure in memory.

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Story 179 · Papers at the Border

Crossing the border on her way from her daughter's home to her son's, the elderly Devaki Devi is stopped at a checkpoint because she cannot find her identity papers. Her daughter Muniya comes from one side, her son Shambhu from the other, but obtaining the old documents proves difficult. After local identification and a check of the records, Devaki Devi is allowed to cross. In the end of her sari she carries the keys to both homes. Yet when the question arises of where to keep the papers, her son falls silent. The border reveals how the homes and relationships on its two sides exceed the single-line identity written on a document.

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Story 180 · The Flood Relief Camp

Displaced by the floods, Ratna lives in a relief camp with her daughter Chunmun. Speeches about women's safety are made from the stage, but a volunteer named Harinandan uses the pretext of a distribution slip to stop her in an isolated passage and subjects her to indecent behaviour and sexual harassment. Ratna protests and leaves the passage. With the support of Neelam, Sugni and other women, she brings a complaint before the authorities. Harinandan is removed from duty, and the withheld slip is returned. Changes are made to the complaint box's location, the lighting, the supervision of distribution and the openness of the passageways. Safety is built not by declarations but by accountable conduct.

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Story 181 · The Red Blanket

On the night of the riot, the body of an unidentified child lies in the hospital beneath a red blanket. People from two neighbourhoods claim him as one of their missing children, seeking proof in the blanket's stitching. Mangala Devi and Sita Musaharin explain that it is one of many blankets made in the same batch for the municipality. The child's identity cannot be established, and his body is handed over to neither side. At the hospital door, two mothers still searching for their sons share bread with one another. Amid rival communal claims, the unknown child's humanity remains intact.

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Story 182 · Do Not Ask Their Names

After a train accident, nurse Pragya Devi insists that the injured be examined for breathing and wounds before anyone asks their names. Outside the temporary treatment centre, rumours circulate about religion, identity and unverified death tolls. Inside, Deepak matches patients with blood donors by blood group. Ramzan Ansari gives blood for Harishankar Paswan, though neither knows the other's identity. Names are checked separately as relatives search for the missing. By keeping treatment and identification in their proper order, the workers make real assistance possible, placing human need ahead of the divisions fostered by rumour.

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Story 183 · The Register

When Devaki Mahto goes missing, her mother Bhavani Devi and brother Jogendra go to the police station. The register wrongly describes Devaki as 'Jogendra's wife'. It records a one-sided account from the owner of her workplace while ignoring the injury on her cheek and a dispute over wages. Found safe at a women's shelter, Devaki demands the chance to give her own account. At her insistence, the police note the one-sided character of the earlier remarks and enter her correct identity alongside the new information. Winning space in the register becomes, for Devaki, a way of reclaiming her voice.

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Story 184 · The Open Door

Rekha returns to her family after being freed from fourteen months of exploitation in a city to which she had been taken on the promise of work. Her relatives wish to protect her, yet neighbours' questions, the silence at home and doubts about her independence make the meaning of her return uncertain. She says that coming home is nothing to hide, but neither must she answer every question. Rekha resumes weaving small baskets from sikki grass and, with Malati Kaki's help, goes to the market. An open door now means the right to step outside on her own feet and return of her own free will.

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Story 185 · Three Minutes

A minor collision between a handcart and a bicycle draws a crowd at the market. An unverified cry that someone has been struck threatens to turn the incident violent. A brick comes into Guddu's hand, while others begin recording the scene on their phones. Nathuni Kaka quietly bends to lift the bicycle. His simple intervention breaks the crowd's circle; the brick is lowered, and the people involved can finally be heard. Later he points out that the three-minute video contains neither the first shove nor the full explanation. Amid rumour and fragmentary images, one unassuming act prevents a moment from altering two young lives irreparably.

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Story 186 · Clothing

Bundles of clothes reach the women's section of a flood-relief camp, but there is nowhere private for them to change. Rupkala Devi draws attention to this omission. Although the officials' accounts provide no separate allocation for screens, she joins together saris of unsuitable sizes and makes a curtain across a damaged room. Sulekha and the other women can at last change with dignity. The distribution register records how many garments have arrived. It cannot, however, capture what the improvised screen provides: not simply cloth, but privacy and the recognition of women's personal dignity.

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Story 187 · The Room at the Station

Seven-year-old Ravi is separated from his family in the crowd at Darbhanga station. Banshi the porter and Ramvilas, a railway employee, take him to a safe room. Outside, people invent names and identities for the child on the strength of guesses, but Ravi holds firmly to his own name. After an all-night search, his parents and little sister Radhika are found. Ravi gives Radhika a piece of mathri he has saved for her. In their reunion, the child's own account of who he is matters more than any stranger's suppositions.

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Story 188 · Silent Testimony

Kusum comes to court to testify about a traumatic event. Other people try to interpret her few words as either courage or fear. During the hearing she answers questions at her own pace and has the words 'very frightened' removed from the written statement: she herself has never said them. Outside, she tells a reporter that she has already said in court what she wished to say. Her mother, too, learns that the right to tell the story belongs to her daughter. Silence is not the absence of Kusum's voice, but part of her freedom to choose how she will use it.

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Story 189 · Two Bodies

After the flood, two unidentified bodies are found near the village. People speculate about their religion and neighbourhood from a red thread, a black cord and the places where they were discovered. Jamir the boatman explains that floodwaters reverse their course, making it impossible to infer where the dead came from. Health worker Rekha Kumari and others insist that both bodies be kept safe until their identities can be reliably established. They are sent to the mortuary, with the religious category left blank. Rather than assign the unknown dead a hasty and possibly false identity, the village chooses caution and respect.

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Story 190 · Milk under Curfew

Three days into the curfew, children in two neighbourhoods are running short of milk. Badri the milkman wants to make his customary deliveries, but people on both sides suspect him for crossing between them. Carrying milk for Maheshwar Sah's granddaughter, he is accused of passing messages. Badri replies that he sells milk; it is the people who have divided a single road into two. During a brief relaxation of the curfew, the milk is distributed. The measures used for the northern and southern neighbourhoods remain separate, but the vessel from which the milk is poured is one and the same.

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Story 191 · The Broken Slipper

After a stampede at the crossroads, journalist Arun Jha sees a broken blue slipper and a red stain on the road and reports a woman's presumed death. Shakuntala Devi, very much alive, reads the report and challenges him. The stain, she explains, was crushed tomato, not blood; the strap of her old slipper broke as she ran. Arun checks the facts, publishes a correction and returns the slipper. Shakuntala has it repaired and sets up her cart again. The journalist learns that a photograph of an abandoned object cannot establish the whole life—or death—of its owner.

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Story 192 · The Locked Room

Promised sewing work and wages, Neelam, Malati and Rukhsana are taken to a city and shut in a room where they are forced to labour. Neelam keeps an account of the days by tying knots in thread. After their rescue, crowds and photographers outside again threaten to invade their privacy. In a shelter, Neelam chooses when to leave her door half-open and when to close it from within. The difference between the door of her former prison and that of the safe room is the right to hold the key. She keeps her knotted thread: the experience of those days cannot simply be erased.

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Story 193 · The Scar

Medical details of the scar on Bimla Devi's arm and her testimony about the violence she suffered are already on record. Nevertheless, the assistance office asks to see the mark again. Some people would display it publicly in the name of proof and sympathy. Bimla insists that the necessary evidence has been given; the curiosity of an audience is not justice. At a public meeting, too, she keeps the right to speak about herself. Later, when she gives the tailor Nasima the measure of her arm, the scar is mentioned only to ensure a comfortable fit. In that ordinary consideration she finds dignity.

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Story 194 · The Night Truck

Twenty-two migrant workers who have lost their jobs depend on a truck arranged by Lalit Sah to take them home at night. Its fare, the rules at the border and the safety of the journey bring driver Badri, official Jaykant, worker Sito and the middleman into conflict. A costly fare is charged for a journey presented as 'assistance' to people with no choice. The workers must cross the border on foot and climb back into the truck afterwards. An opening is left in the tarpaulin for breathing. Between regulations, business and claims of kindness, the exhausted bodies of the workers reveal the journey's true price.

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Story 195 · The Identity Slip

After unrest, a slip tied to an unidentified body in the hospital bears the words 'possibly from the western neighbourhood'. Salman and Zahira recognise their sister Nasim and demand that the guessed description be corrected. Her name and identity are verified, a new slip is attached, and the earlier assumption is formally withdrawn. Yet the correction of a fact cannot immediately dispel the village's fear. To her family, Nasim was never merely a figure in communal reckoning: she was a woman with sewing work unfinished and a life shared with her mother.

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Story 196 · A Child’s Question

After an arson attack in the market, people seeking relief are separated into two groups by a bamboo mat in the panchayat courtyard. Nine-year-old Nayan keeps hearing the words 'those people' and asks how his schoolmate Sahil has suddenly become a stranger. The adults give different accounts of who threw the first stone, of religion and of blame, though none has a certain answer. Nayan tells his little sister Rinni about Sahil by name. If people on both sides call themselves 'us', he asks his mother, who then are 'they'? She teaches him not to rush into conclusions.

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Story 197 · The Price of Testimony

Lakhan Sada comes to court to testify about an accident at the brick kiln. Clerk Bhuvaneshwar has warned him that telling the truth will cost all three members of his family their jobs. Lakhan states that the workers were ordered to carry on instead of replacing the damaged bamboo support. In the witness box he must face humiliation and the fear of losing his livelihood. The following day his name and that of his brother Harinath disappear from the kiln's work list; his wife Budhni's remains. His testimony has been recorded, but the economic and human price of giving it has not yet been fully paid.

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Story 198 · Across the River

When a flood breaches the Bagmati embankment, Bansi Sahni's boat ferries people to a raised road. Ramnarayan Jha, Jhagru Paswan, Sakina Bibi, Faizan and elderly Mahavir Mandal help one another out of the boat. At the relief point they drink from the same bowl without asking questions of caste or faith. Once they reach safe ground, however, people begin returning to their separate social circles. When Bansi needs a small vessel to bail water from the boat before the next crossing, Ramnarayan gives him one. The journey holds both the solidarity formed in danger and the divisions that ordinary life restores.

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Story 199 · Horse Gram Dal

Ramlochan and Saraswati have only a little horse gram left at home, yet they must find the money to take the ailing Jagmaya to hospital. In dividing the grain between food, seed and what can be sold, the couple faces a painful choice. Selling enough to pay for treatment reduces the seed for the next sowing, just as the market price rises. They plant the horse gram that remains more thinly and sow finger millet in the empty strip. Jagmaya recovers. Behind a single meal, a single planting and the care of one sick person lies the intricate arithmetic of a farming household's life.

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Story 200 · The Dream of One Bigha

For five years Shivnath has cultivated one bigha of land as a sharecropper, dreaming of buying it. Its owner, Devanath Chaudhary, offers to sell, but the advance payment comes due at the same time as the fees for his daughter Rama's education and hostel. Rama offers to postpone her studies. Shivnath pays her fees instead, and another buyer purchases the land. The new owner proposes that Shivnath continue farming the same field on shares. He agrees on the condition that the costs of seed and fertiliser be shared. The bigha does not become his, but his daughter continues her education and he goes on farming on new terms.

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Story 201 · The Empty Bag

Gopinath Sah, who has earned his living selling seed, goes to the market with his old bag, scales, weights and account book. His daughter Manju has learnt to serve customers, weigh their purchases and keep track of credit. Little by little, Gopinath places everything in her hands. When they return home the bag is empty; yet its emptiness marks not the end of a livelihood but the passing of a responsibility from one generation to the next. On the following market day he gives Manju the rope for fastening the tarpaulin and stays at home.

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Story 202 · A Patch of Sunlight

In winter Jagdish Mahto struggles with a chest ailment, while Basanti Devi suffers pain in her knees. Their doctor has advised them both to sit in the sun, but the narrow courtyard admits only a patch of warmth too small for two stools. Each tries to give the other more sunlight, shifting the stools again and again. At last they spread a mat and sit together, sharing the dwindling light. When the sun has gone, they take each other's hand and go indoors. That small, wordless act is the fullest expression of their affection.

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Story 203 · The Boat Remained Tied

Across the river there is a fair and a school celebration. Raghunath Sahni, the boatman, has been ferrying people there since morning; his wife Phulo and daughter Sunita are going too. Sunita is due to sing at three, but Raghunath returns his boat to the home landing and ties it up. The sounds of the fair and the applause carry across the water; the words of his daughter's song do not. His responsibility to keep the landing and boat ready for those returning after dark keeps him on this bank, away from the festivities on the other.

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Story 204 · The Sound of the Fridge

When the electricity fails and the old refrigerator falls silent, suppressed financial anxieties surface in the home of Naresh and Meena. Sales at Naresh's little ironware shop have declined, and debts make him consider selling the fridge. Meena explains its place in their daily accounts of milk, curd and household expenses. The power returns and the fridge hums again, but their disagreement over keeping or selling it remains unresolved. Together they decide how much milk to buy in the morning and open their expense registers before one another.

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Story 205 · A Month’s Rent

Amar has lost two days' wages at the warehouse, and medicine for his daughter Ruchi has cost the family more. When the monthly rent falls due, he and his wife Jyoti hesitate to tell their landlord, Shashikant Babu, how difficult things have become. An old receipt lies beneath the leg of a wobbly table. The new receipt leaves five hundred rupees outstanding. After a conversation, the unpaid sum is entered clearly. Amar retrieves and saves the old receipt as well. Poverty has not vanished, but the couple begin to replace concealment with an honest account of what they owe.

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Story 206 · The Blue Mug

Pradeep's elbow strikes Sarita's blue mug in the kitchen and breaks it. The loss of an ordinary object revives an old disagreement over the cost of replacing things, household decisions and each person's right to be heard. They drink tea from steel tumblers and discuss the seventy rupees involved. Sarita buys a new mug in the earth colour she has chosen. As mug and tumbler change hands, the bitterness between them eases a little. Nothing is wholly settled, but the money spent on a mug is no longer treated as an objectionable indulgence; it is acknowledged as a need.

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Story 207 · The Charger

When the household's only charger disappears from its usual nail, Manoj suspects his daughter Neera and his wife Kusum of taking it. Despite Neera's denial, he opens her bag and searches her private belongings. The charger is eventually found behind the wooden platform. Its recovery makes plain that the real matter is not the missing object but trust and personal boundaries. Manoj promises never again to open Neera's bag without permission. Later, even when rain threatens to soak it, he asks his daughter before touching it.

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Story 208 · The Clothesline

After the rains, an old clothesline becomes the cause of a quarrel between Sharda Devi and her neighbour Kamli Devi. Stretched beside the boundary of their two courtyards, it brings back memories of an earlier flood, a white bedsheet and an insult never fully understood. The younger members of the families listen to each woman's account. They stretch a new line but do not take down the old one. Both lines sway independently, yet the old thorn lodged in the shared boundary wall remains.

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Story 209 · The Dry Tap

One morning the household tap yields no water, and the entire burden of finding a supply falls upon Kalyani Devi. Her husband Dinesh, daughter Madhavi and son Chandan all worry about their own schedules, while Kalyani's sewing customer is waiting too. The water comes late. In the interval the family begins to understand that household labour does not happen of its own accord. When the tap flows again, Dinesh takes responsibility for filling the vessels and turning it off. Kalyani can return to her sewing machine without being summoned for every small need.

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Story 210 · Half a Kilo of Rice

There is only a handful of rice left in Malati Devi's pot for the evening meal. Shashikant is ashamed to buy another half-kilo on credit and see his name entered in the shopkeeper's ledger. His wife manages the household with her sewing earnings and shares the figures with him openly. Slowly he accepts that Basudev Sah's ledger need not be a record of disgrace: it can simply account for an unpaid sum. In the end he goes back for the rice. The debt is written down, and this time he does not hide the bag on his way home.

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Story 211 · The Balcony Flowerpot

Too much sun has left the hibiscus wilting in its pot on the balcony. As Rajni and Vinay talk about moving the plant, they begin discussing their home and the possibility of living elsewhere. Vinay has already looked into the rent and amenities of two other houses, but has not shared all the details with Rajni. They agree on a time to view them, add up the costs and move the plant out of the strip of harsh sunlight. It does not immediately turn green again; nor do they decide at once to move. But the papers concerning the choice now lie open before them both.

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Story 212 · The Wrong Number

After the death of his wife, Harinarayan Jha's days have lost their rhythm. A call made to the wrong number, intended as a health reminder for Saroj Devi, begins to bring back fixed hours for milk, meals and waiting. Sometimes the phone rings and sometimes it does not, yet the stranger's name and the unexpected regularity lend his days a curious support. Eventually his daughter Sandhya learns of it. When another mistaken call comes for Saroj Devi, Harinarayan accepts it without watching the clock. He goes on with his morning tea and newspaper, following a routine of his own.

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Story 213 · The Old Curtain

As the family prepares to leave their rented house, Ruchi wants to throw away a faded green curtain. Mala and Sudhir remember its worn loops and the many uses it has served. The windows, privacy and practical needs of the new home will be different. Instead of discarding the curtain, they keep it for the time being and consider other purposes it might serve. Ruchi examines the loops herself. By the end, the curtain is neither a relic to be revered merely because it is old nor a worthless scrap. It remains an object in the household, awaiting a considered decision.

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Story 214 · The Empty Gas Cylinder

In the middle of preparing supper, the gas cylinder runs empty. As Anima, Shashank and their daughter Shuchi look for another way to cook, unspoken tensions emerge around the family's belongings, arrangements and Shuchi's future. Anima and Shashank confront the question of decisions made without consulting each other; Shuchi asks to be told the truth about matters that concern her. A new cylinder and a small electric cooker solve the immediate problem of the meal, but the family's future arrangements remain unsettled. Shuchi insists on first inspecting the window, lock and water supply wherever she may live: she has a say in the choice.

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Story 215 · Two Plates

Kiran and Sadanand lay two plates on the table as they wait for a visitor who does not arrive on time. Sadanand has brought out a file concerning a possible job for the first time in three months. Their conversation also turns to the family's meagre income and Kiran's earnings from sewing. The expected guest never comes, but the meal is not wasted. Through a new contact, Sadanand secures an appointment about work for eleven the following morning. Kiran helps prepare the necessary photographs and papers. Uncertain waiting gives way to preparation for a definite meeting.

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Story 216 · The Neighbour’s Television

Malati Devi's wall clock has stopped. For some time she has measured the hours of her day by listening to programmes on the neighbour's television. When its sound ceases, her familiar pattern of sorting makhana, eating and resting falls apart. She comes to know more of the neighbouring family's life and its own routine. Malati has her clock repaired and begins to arrange her time for herself. The television is now in a more distant room, but softer everyday sounds still pass between the two households. Self-reliance does not erase the fine threads of informal neighbourliness.

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Story 217 · The Broken Lift

Reena Devi lives on the fifth floor and Vinod Thakur on the seventh, but for years they have exchanged no more than formal greetings. One day the lift stalls between floors, giving them time to speak about work, daily journeys, livelihoods and the demands made upon their hours. During the repairs, encounters on the stairs deepen their understanding of each other's difficulties. When the lift is working again, Reena offers to allow Vinod time to join her before she goes up. Their conversation remains brief, but the old distance between two near-strangers has narrowed.

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Story 218 · The Grocery List

When rice runs low at home, Sudha and Vinay draw up a grocery list. With little money to spend, their different priorities emerge as they decide how much rice, lentils, oil, sugar and other essentials to buy. At Mahesh Sah's shop they must also weigh the lower cost of buying in bulk against the need to save cash immediately. They cross out quantities, add and subtract, and reconsider their choices. Finally they agree to look over the next list together before going shopping. Their handwriting remains distinct, but the unfilled spaces on the slip become room for a shared decision.

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Story 219 · The Old Mattress

For years Renu and Madhav have kept turning over a worn cotton mattress rather than replacing it. Back pain, fear of expense and the habit of saying 'It will do for now' lead to an argument. As they consider a new mattress, they also have the old bedstead repaired. The cotton from the discarded mattress is made into small cushions for sitting. On the new mattress they lie on their respective sides, and the level space between them is no longer a hollow. Acknowledging discomfort and seeking a remedy together becomes part of their conversation as husband and wife.

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Story 220 · The Doorbell

Their landlord, Govind Babu, announces that he may show the house to prospective tenants that night. Shyamanand, Kamala and their children suspend ordinary household life while waiting for the bell. During the long evening they speak of rising rent, the search for another home, the children's schooling and their different fears. A bell rings, but it has been pressed in error; the expected visitors never arrive. Even so, the waiting has allowed the family to discuss its real predicament. At the end Shyamanand opens again a list of three possible homes, including one near the school.

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Story 221 · The Leftover Vegetables

Nirmala Devi puts the vegetables left in her cooking pan into an old steel container. The scratched letters 'M' and 'R' on its side recall the divided relationships within the household. This little act of saving food opens a discussion of separate hearths, separate accounts and the shared responsibility of caring for an elderly mother. Bina and Nirmala reconsider their schedules and arrangements for meals. In the end both women's leftovers fit into the same container. When her son Sonu asks whose vegetables they are, Nirmala says they belong to the house. The old letters remain, but they no longer define a fresh boundary.

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Story 222 · The Closed Window

Behind their rented room, a spice-grinding mill works late into the night. Its noise disrupts Rashmi's studies, and Naresh and Meenakshi improvise a way of closing the damaged window. Between rent, low wages, examination fees and the cost of repairing a fan, they cannot agree which expense should come first. Rashmi tells her parents that they worry about her but conceal their financial concerns from each other. At last they place the wage slips and household expenses openly on the table. The window stays shut, but their conversation opens.

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Story 223 · Sunday Clothes

Because their mother Kamala Devi's hands are painful, her daughters Malati and Sudha come on Sunday to wash and fold her clothes. Ordinary chores revive old disputes about selling a sewing machine, unanswered telephone calls and the sisters' different expectations of one another. Folding the garments brings each up against her own memories and grievances. Instead of trying to settle everything at once, they divide the work for the following Sunday. They leave after putting their mother's clothes away. The quarrel is not over, but the path of family cooperation has not closed.

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Story 224 · After the Mustard Harvest

When the mustard has been cut, Bhola Mandal and Ramvilas review the income from the crop and the labour each has contributed. Their twenty-year partnership, once divided neatly in halves, has grown more complicated with changes in oxen, machinery, wages and farming itself. From landowner Janki Devi's household comes the suggestion that only one of them should cultivate the field, but she recognises the value of their long association. Before the next crop they begin setting down new terms for the partnership. In the empty field, the work ahead is not merely sowing seed, but finding a fairer way to sustain a relationship.

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Story 225 · The Herdsman’s Footpath

A new paved road cuts across the old path by which Budhan Paswan has taken his goats and calves to the grazing land. The journey has become difficult and unsafe. His granddaughter Runki measures the route and draws it in her notebook, while villagers consider the road verge, the drain and the needs of passing animals. A plank crossing and a safer passage are arranged. Runki understands that reducing a distance is not the same as making the journey shorter for everyone. Through the grass, the path towards the old destination begins to appear again.

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Story 226 · The Pond Keeper

For years Banshi Mahto, keeper of the Kajraha pond, has marked the rise and fall of its water on a bamboo pole. When a scheme is proposed to clean and deepen the pond, the contractor's measurements fail to agree with his experience. Banshi explains that dredging without understanding the silt along its edge, the channels through which rain enters and the natural movement of water could do harm. Engineer Arun agrees to record the old marks alongside new measurements. The plan moves forward, with the possibility that responsibility for caring for the pond may pass beyond one man to the next generation.

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Story 227 · Evening at the Cattle Shed

Naresh begins keeping systematic figures for milk, fodder and expenses at the cattle shed. His father Jagarnath reminds him that the care of animals cannot be reduced to quantities of milk. The temperaments of Jhumki, Supti and the others, slight signs of illness and the need for evening rest matter too. As father and son argue, the older man's experience and the younger man's register begin to complement each other. At last Naresh writes 'Evening: all well' beside the numbers. The animals' quiet breathing and chewing of the cud give life to what the accounts alone could not contain.

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Story 228 · The Mango Orchard

Amarnath comes from the city with his wife Kavita and daughter Richa to sell the family's ancestral mango orchard. The land price is settled, but an earlier agreement over the fruit and the labour of Badri, who guards the orchard, require separate accounting. Their discussions make clear that ownership of the land, rights to the mangoes and responsibility for tending the trees are not one and the same. The old receipt is preserved with the registration papers. The owner changes, but the relation between the mangoes ripening in Jeth and those who care for the trees cannot be changed overnight.

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Story 229 · The Kamala’s Course

As the Kamala River changes its course, the old boundary of a plot of land no longer corresponds to the portion that can now be cultivated. Sudama Yadav and his nephew Neeraj, visiting from the city, begin measuring. The acreage recorded on paper, the old boundary peg and the new channel offer three different kinds of evidence. With a sale under consideration, Neeraj realises that it would be wrong to assign a firm price to land whose extent is uncertain. He records the differing conditions separately and leaves the leaning bamboo peg in place. The river keeps flowing; those who live beside it must keep revising their lines.

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Story 230 · The Scent of Paddy

Returning to the village at harvest time after seven years, Anil seeks his childhood and his home in the scent of paddy. But the moment he takes up a sickle, he sees that remembering farm work is not the same as performing it. He talks with Rajesh, his father and the people working in the fields about their contributions, the money involved and the division of responsibility. Anil must return to the city, while Rajesh will tend the farm. In his new ledger, Anil adds columns not only for income but also for days of labour and care. The scent of paddy becomes a witness to present work rather than a refuge in nostalgia.

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Story 231 · The Tree's Shade

The school is to be expanded with a new room, a tap and a sloping surface for drainage. The engineer's plan takes too little account of the peepal tree and the path rainwater has traditionally followed. From Chhedi Kaka's memories, headteacher Saroja Jha and the builders learn that an unsuitable slope could flood the school. They revise the design after new measurements and attention to the outlet for water. When rain comes, the drain carries it away and the room remains safe. The peepal's shade falls across the new slope, and local knowledge has become part of the construction.

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Story 232 · The Dom’s Flute

The programme for the village festival has room for a visiting group of singers, but no time has been allotted for Chandeshwar Dom's flute. Concern for the stage's prestige and distance rooted in caste prevent him from performing. Members of the audience, especially teacher Rekha, begin to challenge the exclusion. The melody of the flute gradually compels the gathering to listen, and Chandeshwar's name and allotted time are entered in the programme register. People propose that next year's list be made with everyone's participation. Respect requires more than a name on a stage bill: it requires room to be heard.

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Story 233 · The Plan of a Hut

A red survey line for a government drain passes straight through Phulbasiya Devi's hut. In the project papers, the house appears to be empty land. Phulbasiya and her family show the natural fall of the ground and the path the water actually takes. Engineer Shailendra measures again and alters the bend of the drain. In the first heavy rain, water passes safely through the new channel. The working plan now marks the hut as an 'existing dwelling', though legal ownership of the land is still unresolved. Phulbasiya calls it half a victory: at least the house is no longer a blank space on paper.

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Story 234 · The Ox's Bell

Mohan considers selling his oxen, Hirna and Kajru, and relying on a ploughing machine. His ledger sets down the cost of fodder, medicine and the animals themselves, but not fully the wages of Bechan, who has worked with them, his share of the harvest or the ties built over many years. The oxen are sold and the cattle shed stands empty. Bechan's next means of living becomes a question. Mohan starts a fresh reckoning, while Neelu rings the old brass bell. A machine may bring benefits, but it also changes the lives of those who worked beside the animals. It is those uncounted costs the story brings into view.

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Story 235 · The Earthen Road

The start of a regular bus service makes travel easier for students, traders and elderly villagers. But rainwater collects beneath the unmetalled road, threatening to trap the wheels. People first fill the damaged places with brick and earth, then discover that without drainage the repairs cannot last. Disagreements arise over private fields, the road's width and the need to keep the bus running. Once a culvert is built, the water passes beneath and the bus travels over it. The road is still unpaved, but responsibility for maintaining it begins to be understood as a shared one.

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Story 236 · Guardian of the Grazing Ground

For twenty years Dukhan Mahto has held in memory the paths, boundary ridges and movements of animals across the common grazing land. When a proposal arises to fence part of it for private fodder cultivation, a detailed record of its actual use is needed. Dukhan begins writing down when the herds come, and how grazing changes with seasons and water. At the village meeting no one permits the enclosure immediately, but neither is the proposal rejected for good. They agree on two months of observation and a separate calculation of costs. The ground stays open, and knowledge once held in one man's memory becomes evidence for a public decision.

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Story 237 · The Paddy-Planting Song

As Sonmati and the other women transplant paddy, their song keeps the rows and their movements in rhythm. Pawan brings in a transplanting machine, easing the strain on their backs and speeding the work. But it will also affect the women's wages, the jobs awaiting them and the shared rhythm of their labour. The machine's straight lines and the curved corners planted by hand reflect different experiences. The machine is neither wholly condemned nor praised without question. In the evening the unfinished song lingers in the air; amid changing forms of work, its future remains undecided.

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Story 238 · The Register Beneath the Banyan

For years Munilal has sat beneath the banyan tree, recording in an old register which fields were actually reached by canal water. Government records show the dates water was released, but not the seventeen lower fields that stayed dry. With the help of teacher Sudha, officials find a blockage of silt at the canal's third bend. The inquiry records both the water's actual reach and what remains uncertain about the decisions taken. Munilal gives copies of the canal-related pages rather than surrender his entire personal register. The two records remain separate, yet each now challenges the other to account for the truth.

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Story 239 · The Flood Marks

While scraping limewash from the western wall, the family discovers three old lines left by floodwater. Nikhil wants to use the highest to determine the level of the floor in a new room, but his grandmother Sharda Devi reminds him that the house itself had stood at different heights and in different forms during those floods. The family brings together memories of loss, labour and earlier events before building a safer room for medicines and essential papers. The wall is whitewashed again. Though the marks disappear from sight, what they taught survives in the design of the home.

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Story 240 · The First Tractor

Naresh borrows money to bring the village its first tractor. For years Jagesar has ploughed his family's fields with oxen and knows the behaviour of the soil intimately. Again and again, the machine's speed and the timetable for hiring it out conflict with the condition of rain-soaked earth. Gradually Naresh learns to heed Jagesar's caution, while Jagesar comes to understand the machine's uses. The older identity of the 'ploughman' changes as their work becomes an exchange of knowledge. The tractor moves forward, but the field itself compels both men to learn from one another.

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Story 241 · The Boundary Post

Nayan Jha wants to build a wall along the edge of his courtyard, but his neighbour Rameshwar Mandal disputes a single inch of land. The old sal-wood post marks more than a boundary: it holds the memory of the heights of children from both families, measured against it over the years. Neither the mason's measurements nor the old papers yield a simple, final answer. At Nirmala's suggestion, the families agree to a shared wall, divide the expense and leave an open lattice above it. The post is planted again beside their common gateway, where the heights of a new generation can continue to be marked. A dispute over land becomes a shared recognition of inherited memory.

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Story 242 · The Empty Cattle Shed

There are fewer cattle in the village now, and the old cattle shed belonging to Shivnath Jha stands empty. Even so, he sweeps it every morning. His family considers the cleaning pointless, yet the shed serves, by turns, as a place for children to play, a temporary shelter for animals and a site for vaccination. When the house is enlarged, Shivnath allows part of the shed to be converted but keeps the rest open. One day, when he is ill, his grandson Nachiketa takes up the broom himself. He comes to understand that keeping an empty place clean is not merely an attachment to what has passed; it is also a way of leaving that space available for what the future may require.

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Story 243 · The Last Harvest

Before the sale of their ancestral paddy field is formally registered, Harinarayan Jha's family decides to reap its final crop by hand. His daughter Rama and other relatives set aside their city lives for a few days and enter the field. One person's hands are scraped raw, another's row goes crooked, but the labour allows them to feel anew their family's old connection with the land. Once the crop has been cut, nothing in the rows reveals which share of the work belonged to whom. They lay down their sickles for a photograph. The documents record a transaction in land; they cannot record the collective experience of that last harvest.

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Story 244 · The Village of Certificates

Certificates of honour and achievement hang on the walls of almost every house in Sonbarsa. The school, too, has won praise for achieving full enrolment, but the shortage of teachers and the reality of classroom learning have found no place within the frames. A child named Chandan exposes the difference by asking a simple question. Instead of displaying more testimonials, the village begins trying to record what its school actually needs. Saroja Jha rewrites the numbers relating to teachers and pupils on the wall. On an unframed sheet of paper, Chandan learns to read words. The value of an honour shifts away from announcing success and towards the courage to recognise unfinished work.

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Story 245 · Cleanliness Day

The village is full of guests, banners and photographs for Cleanliness Day, yet the rubbish heaped at the bend in the road has not been collected for weeks. Malati, the sanitation worker, sweeps there every day, but the waste remains where it is. A boy named Sonu begins writing down the dates when rubbish is actually removed. Eventually a collection vehicle takes the heap away, and the school register acquires separate columns for ‘swept’ and ‘waste collected’. The truth of the record, and the regular service it requires, prove more important than the bright image of the celebration.

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Story 246 · The Assembly of the Literate

At a celebration declaring the village ‘literate’, officials and teachers deliver speeches, though they themselves struggle to understand the difficult questions in an ordinary application form. Deepak is pressed to enter an estimated figure so that the claim to an award can go forward. Phulkumari Devi asks why being able to read, understanding what one reads and filling out one’s own application should be treated as the same thing. In place of the ceremony, the villagers hold a session of practical learning. They practise filling out bank, school and grant applications. Verification produces a lower figure, but literacy has acquired a more substantial meaning: understanding and handling one’s own affairs.

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Story 247 · The Model Square

The village square has repeatedly been renamed—from ‘Youth’ and ‘Harmony’ to ‘New Awakening’ and, finally, ‘Model Square’—but the deep pothole in its centre has remained. Sumedha, granddaughter of the mason Jagdish, examines the old signboards and official registers and discovers that villagers, too, have played a part in postponing the repair. They agree to interrupt shopkeeping and traffic for a short time and fill the hole together. When the rains come and water no longer gathers there, the use of the work is plain. Instead of adding a sixth name, Sumedha records the date on which the pothole was filled.

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Story 248 · The Ribbon of Development

A red ribbon is cut again and again to inaugurate the same drain, although its final seven handspans have never been completed. Jagmohan the tailor and his granddaughter Abha join the ceremonial ribbons together and measure them, making the unfinished work visible. Rainwater still cannot flow away, rendering the splendour of the inaugurations meaningless. At last the masons clear the old outlet and build the remaining stretch. Once the water runs freely, the work is handed over without another ceremony. Measurement, repair and the outcome of work—not a red ribbon—become the true marks of development.

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Story 249 · A Distinguished Family

A gleaming sign proclaiming ‘Distinguished Family’ is fixed to the gate of the Jha household. Inside, a room is crowded with awards, certificates and honours accumulated over generations, yet the elderly Subhadra Devi has no permanent room of her own. Her granddaughter Gauri begins asking why. The family sorts through its possessions, moves the old distinctions to suitable places and sets aside one room for Subhadra Devi’s lasting use. Rain continues to soak the sign at the gate. Indoors, however, a person’s privacy and comfort are, for the first time, considered more important than prestige.

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Story 250 · The Day of the Rumour

An anonymous message spreads through the village messaging group, claiming that every household must place a blue bucket outside its door for a tap-water inspection. Without checking the source, people forward the message and spend the night guarding their buckets. The office confirms that no such inspection has been scheduled. Arun Sir, a teacher at the school, teaches four questions: where, when, from what source and under whose responsibility? When a new rumour warns of a power cut, the villagers do not repeat it unquestioningly; they ask for evidence. Thoughtful questions begin to take the place of fear.

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Story 251 · The Topper’s Photograph

A photograph of Rashmi, who has scored ninety-four per cent in science, hangs proudly on the school veranda. Directly opposite it, the laboratory is locked, its interior filled with boxes of old examination papers. At the felicitation ceremony Rashmi speaks not only about her marks but also about the absence of practical experiments. With the help of a student named Naina and the teachers, the laboratory is cleared, the apparatus is brought back into use and regular practical periods are fixed. The photograph is not removed. Instead, the open door facing it makes visible the distance between examination marks and education.

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Story 252 · The Cleanest House

Hoping to win the ‘Cleanest House’ competition, Sarita Devi polishes her courtyard until it shines, but the unwanted rubbish is thrown into the field of her neighbour Jaykali. The inspection team asks where the waste actually goes. Sarita and her family begin separating refuse, making compost from biodegradable matter and arranging to pass on materials that can be used again. Her house does not win the prize, yet the neighbouring field is cleaned and their relationship improves. Neetu’s question makes clear that the responsibility for a clean home extends beyond its own walls.

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Story 253 · The Felicitation Ceremony

Harinarayan Jha is chosen for an honour recognising forty years of postal service, but both banner and certificate print his name as ‘Harinandan’. The organisers worry about photographs and the ceremony’s prestige, while the question of the recipient’s real name is treated as secondary. The mistake has to be corrected, and a conspicuous strip bearing the right name is placed over the certificate. People comment on how the photograph looks; Harinarayan says that having his name right is enough. Later, an ordinary official envelope addressed correctly gives him a more immediate sense of being recognised than the formal honour did.

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Story 254 · A Speech Against Cheating

Nirmal Jha is asked to deliver the main address during the school's anti-cheating week. While preparing his speech, he must confront the question of acknowledging ideas taken from other sources. Anupama, a student, and the ensuing discussion at school help him recognise the contradiction in concealing sources while preaching against copying in examinations. After the speech, a register is introduced for recording sources. While supervising an examination, Nirmal Babu maintains discipline without humiliating the pupils. He does not erase his own search history: acknowledging his mistake has itself become part of his education.

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Story 255 · The Library Inauguration

The library opens with great pomp, but eighteen locks have been fitted to protect just sixteen books. Naina wants to read, yet keys, registers and permissions obstruct her at every turn. A village discussion reveals how keeping readers away in the name of protecting books defeats the very purpose of a library. The unnecessary locks are removed, simple rules for borrowing are adopted, and children begin taking books home. A year later, the turned-down corners of the books are evidence that they have been read, not merely signs of damage.

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Story 256 · The Chairs of Caste

The community hall has twenty-eight identical blue chairs, yet at meetings people arrange themselves according to an old hierarchy of caste and family. A girl named Neelu draws a map showing the chair numbers and where everyone actually sits. Even when the numbers are changed, the old order of places reappears. In conversation, the villagers realise that, though there is no written rule, inherited positions have settled into the habits of their bodies. At the next meeting, chairs are moved according to people’s needs and the work before them. Neelu writes that no seat is permanent. Equal chairs can finally become an opportunity to sit together as equals.

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Story 257 · The Digital Village

A shining sign at the entrance to Bankatta announces a ‘Fully Digital Village’, but mobile-phone signals do not reach several hamlets. The public service centre has a computer, yet submitting applications remains difficult. Arati measures the actual signal strength in different places and prepares a new map. Neither an official inspection nor the board’s solar-powered light proves that a service is available. The southern hamlet is still without network coverage. Arati leaves the map incomplete and refuses to write the word ‘fully’, for the true measure of technological achievement lies in whether people can actually use it.

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Story 258 · Proof of Poverty

Kamli Devi makes leaf plates and works as an agricultural labourer to keep her daughter Meera in school. To obtain student assistance, she needs a poverty certificate, officially issued free of charge. Yet securing it costs journeys, photographs, copies of papers, lost wages and four days of her mother’s labour. Meera records the real expenses on a separate sheet. The application is eventually accepted. When a neighbour comes to obtain the same certificate, Kamli shows her both the line stating ‘zero fee’ and the account of what it truly costs. The story exposes the gap between the government’s ‘free of charge’ and the experience of the poor.

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Story 259 · The Silent Committee

At a women’s sewing cooperative, workers complain that their wages are being entered too low, but they are advised to remain silent in the name of the complaint box’s ‘confidentiality’. Sunita and the other workers compare the number of bundles they have completed. An inquiry uncovers a difference between the register and the recorded receipts. The committee arranges to protect the complainants’ names while openly checking the facts. Beside the complaint box, a board is put up showing each issue and its progress. In the end, the committee’s silence no longer means suppressing people’s voices; it means being quiet enough to hear them.

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Story 260 · The Ideal Marriage

Shashibhushan Jha campaigns against dowry, but as preparations begin for his son Aniruddha’s wedding, expectations emerge little by little under the names of household goods, a bed, a scooter and gifts. Through five questions, Komal identifies the gap between the proclaimed ideal and what happens at home. Mrinalini asks for a say in decisions about her new life and its expenses. Instead of slogans at the ceremony, the family’s actual demands become subjects for discussion. After the wedding, the couple buy a bed with their own money. The household’s claim to be ‘dowry-free’ ceases to be an easy certificate and becomes a principle that must continually be tested against its conduct.

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Story 261 · Everyone’s Opinion

At a meeting of the village council, everyone declares in unison, ‘We all think independently.’ Yet the decision has already been shaped by familiar routines and the voices of the influential. Kanak asks that dissenting opinions be recorded. Ballot papers, vote totals and the reasons for each decision begin to be kept separately. Not everyone is entirely satisfied, but disagreement can now be acknowledged openly. The signboard loses its collective boast about ‘independent thinking’; only ‘Open Forum for Discussion’ remains. At the next meeting, many voices are heard instead of one.

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Story 262 · The Recipient of the Award

Naval Kumar helps villagers fill out their applications. While completing the contact field on an award nomination for the elderly Sarayu Kaka’s community service, Naval writes his own name. The award goes to him, although Sarayu Kaka has done the actual work. The trust’s rules do not allow the name to be changed. Naval understands that the convenience of paperwork can become an injustice in the distribution of credit. On the next nomination, he clearly enters the name of the person who served, Sushma Devi, and identifies himself only as the one who filled out the application. The brass plaque he received becomes a paperweight on his desk.

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Story 263 · A New Rule

At the cooperative seed store, one new rule after another has been written in an effort to manage the crowd of farmers, yet the queue remains jammed at the entrance. Examining the old orders and the actual route through the store, Neelima notices that a cupboard is obstructing the doorway. Moving it proves more useful than changing Rules Eighteen, Nineteen and Twenty. As soon as the entrance is clear, distribution proceeds smoothly. The old orders are not thrown away. A note is placed above them recording what has been learned: before making another rule, look at the obstruction that actually exists.

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Story 264 · The Cupboard Inside

To repair a damp wall, the family must move the iron cupboard standing against it. When the doors are opened, neglected matters come into view: the division of papers into originals and copies, the elderly Kamala’s documents and letters concerning Sushma’s own health. The family sorts the files, marks their dates and shares responsibility for the keys. One shelf is left empty. Finding an old recommendation for a blood test, Sushma decides to visit the health centre herself. Though the documents are put away again, the care of the entire household is no longer left to her alone.

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Story 265 · Two Hours on the Roof

Everyone else has gone to a wedding procession, leaving Shailaja Devi at home because of pain in her knees, with her daughter-in-law Kanak. On a hot night in the month of Jeth, two quiet hours on the roof give them their first uninterrupted chance to hear about each other’s interests, weariness and unspoken expectations. The mother-in-law learns that Kanak’s attention to her phone is not a form of neglect; Kanak realises that Shailaja needs time of her own for reading. Later, room is made for visits to the library, and conversation finds a new place amid the household chores. Both women come to see that not every task has to be completed at once.

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Story 266 · The Daughter-in-Law’s Room

When the new house is built, Sudha Devi, the mother-in-law, wants to keep her promise to give Madhavi a separate room. Gradually, however, it fills with trunks, quilts and stored household goods. Madhavi wants a place where she can sit and write. After an argument, the family clears some space on a shelf and puts a low bed in the room. It does not immediately become entirely private. But one day Sudha Devi asks Madhavi before putting a new blanket inside. That small question marks the beginning of a real right to the room.

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Story 267 · The Key to Her Parents' Home

Even after her marriage, Anima keeps the old key to her parents' house on her key ring. Her husband Ajit and other family members see it in the light of the household's changing relationships. When a new bell is fitted at the entrance to her parents' house, the old habit of letting herself in without asking begins to change as well. Anima reflects on what she means by the word 'home'. In the end, she uses the key to lock the empty house. The bell remains a signal for visitors at the door, while the key stays in her own bag. Her sense of belonging has not ended, but it has changed its form.

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Story 268 · The Cost of Sewing

Sudha's sewing machine helps pay the household expenses, yet her earnings are regarded as small and uncertain. Pramod's salary, household insurance, the children's needs and the expenses of Sudha's sewing customers have all become mixed together in a single domestic account. Sudha prepares a separate register of measurements and payments, showing where the money from her work has gone. Gradually, the family learns to recognise sewing as a genuine economic contribution. Her daughter Ragini sees that words change slowly, but accounts can be corrected first. Replenishing a small reel of thread gives tangible form to labour that has long remained invisible.

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Story 269 · The Examination Form

The last date for submitting Ragini’s Bachelor of Science examination form is 12 September; the next instalment of her brother Raushan’s coaching fees is due on 13 September. The family has limited money and at first treats Raushan’s expense as the more urgent one. Ragini speaks plainly in defence of her right, and the family reconsiders its priorities in education. Her form is submitted on time, while Raushan arranges to defer the date of his instalment. The two dates are marked separately on the wall calendar. The futures of the two children no longer block one another’s way.

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Story 270 · The Kitchen Door

In the house at Rambagh, the kitchen door hears everyone’s instructions from early morning. Kiran must prepare Ritu’s school lunchbox, Shailesh’s rotis, Harimohan’s porridge and the household’s other needs at the same time; the hours of Phulo, the woman who works in the house, are also overlooked. Whenever something is late, Kiran takes the blame. A timetable written in chalk helps everyone see that each task has its own limits. Phulo writes down the time she needs for her tea as well. The open kitchen door becomes a place not merely for giving orders, but for understanding one another’s time.

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Story 271 · The Red Box

Bhagirathi Devi's red iron box has remained locked for years. The family's curiosity, the daughter-in-law's sense of entitlement after long years of service, and granddaughter Aditi's belief in personal privacy turn the box into a source of contention. Bhagirathi reserves the right to decide what she will give, to whom, and when. Gradually the family understands that caring for someone does not confer ownership of all that person's private possessions. In the end the grandmother does not open the box. Instead, she lets Aditi choose something from a little pouch of buttons. The locked box is no longer a symbol of anyone's defeat.

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Story 272 · The Sister's Telephone

Every member of the household has a customary time for receiving telephone calls, yet questions are raised about daughter Mrinalini's late-night calls. A schoolteacher, Mrinalini is helping her pupil Kajal through a crisis; to her family, however, the contact at such an hour looks suspicious. Once Kajal's difficulties and need for safety become clear, the calls acquire another meaning. A place is arranged for charging the telephone in Mrinalini's room. At the end, a simple message arrives from Kajal, and the family does not ask who has sent it. The telephone becomes an instrument both of Mrinalini's privacy and of her responsibility.

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Story 273 · The Young Woman Who Rented a Room

Anamika, a hospital nurse, often returns late to her rented accommodation after a night shift. Her landlady, Rampyari Devi, is bound by old rules about the gate's latch, the neighbours' watchful eyes, and the hours at which a woman may come and go. A conversation about Anamika's work and her need to enter safely raises the question of who has the right to a key. Thereafter, other women's journeys at night, too, begin to seem an ordinary part of neighbourhood life. When Anamika eventually moves away, Rampyari Devi still finds herself listening for the latch; in time, however, the neighbours no longer wake at the sound of the gate.

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Story 274 · The Gift of a Sari

With affection, Renu Didi gives Madhulika a blue sari. Yet the giver's expectations persist: when and how it should be worn, and what should be done with the cloth left over from its stitching. Madhulika is caught between gratitude and her own preferences. In conversation, Renu comes to understand that giving a present does not mean retaining permanent authority over its use. Madhulika considers making a little pouch for bangles from the spare fabric. This time, when she picks up the scissors, she does not feel that she must first seek anyone's permission.

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Story 275 · The Dining Table

When a dining table with four chairs arrives, everyone assumes that the old arrangement of sitting on low wooden seats has changed. But the order in which meals are served, the places allotted to men and women, and the customary division of domestic labour survive alongside the new furniture. A child's drawing and the family's daily conduct bring that difference into view. Little by little, the right to sit at the table changes. At last, seeing Madhavi seated in the chair he usually occupies, Ayush unfolds an extra chair for himself. A four-chair table accommodating five people becomes an image of a changing social order.

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Story 276 · The Aunt Who Kept Silent

Everyone in the household has come to regard Aunt Sharda's silence as part of her easygoing nature. Her granddaughter Anvi begins to recognise the wishes concealed beneath it. The family makes decisions about the neem tree and the arrangement of the courtyard without asking Sharda's opinion. Speaking with Anvi, Sharda explains how difficult it becomes to express a wish when others have already decided what one must want. Gradually the household learns to wait for her answer. At last, when asked where the pot of holy basil should stand, Sharda herself says, 'Here.' Her decision is accepted.

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Story 277 · The Mirror at the Beauty Parlour

Before her wedding, Surabhi sits before the large mirror in a beauty parlour. Malati asks her to choose how she would like to be made up, but numerous notes from relatives and acquaintances have already attempted to dictate her complexion, hairstyle and appearance. Surabhi states her own preferences clearly, accepting some suggestions and rejecting others. After the wedding, she sees in a smaller mirror her tiredness, laughter, a smudge of kohl and the adornment she chose for herself, all together. Without the frame imposed by other people's expectations, her face seems more fully her own.

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Story 278 · The First Month at Work

Sanjana's first job begins like a celebration in the household. Once her salary arrives, various members of the family try to decide, each according to their own calculations, how her earnings should be spent. Sanjana is willing to contribute to household expenses, but does not accept that others should command her entire income. She writes down separately the cost of her bus pass, her personal expenses and her share of the family's needs. During that first month, a new boundary takes shape in the household's conversations about money. Setting down her second payslip, Sanjana understands that her salary is an important part of the household, but is not the whole household.

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Story 279 · The Old Petticoat

As the family sorts through old clothes before the rains, Sudha Devi's worn petticoat comes to light. Its seams, stitches in mismatched colours and repeatedly patched fabric bear witness to years of want and unacknowledged household labour. At first the younger generation calls it rubbish; then they begin to hear the history of each repair. There is no easy decision about whether to preserve the garment or put it to use again. At the end, Anwita looks at a new, crooked yellow stitch and understands that a family's history lives not only in celebrations but also in the unseen mending of clothes worn thin.

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Story 280 · The Guest Room

Devaki Devi's large house has four bedrooms, yet none is permanently her own. Her bedding is moved repeatedly to suit the convenience of other family members and their guests. Her granddaughter Isha questions this arrangement. Slowly, Devaki begins placing her belongings in the guest room and making it a settled place for herself. The sign on the door still reads 'Guest', but her clock now hangs inside. For the first time she can go to sleep without wondering where she will be expected to lie down that night. The beginning of a right to private space requires no new construction, only a different use of a room already there.

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Story 281 · Hidden Savings

Malati Devi does not keep her emergency savings in a single box at home. Small sums paid in advance and entered in the account books of the grocer, milk seller, pharmacy and vegetable vendor provide an invisible reserve. When a crisis strikes the household, the usefulness of this money becomes apparent. So does the question raised by her husband, Jagdish Babu: who has the right to decide how those savings will be used? Malati makes it clear that she retains authority over money she has saved while managing household expenditure. The family establishes a shared emergency envelope, but Malati continues her own practice of putting small amounts aside.

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Story 282 · The Woman Missing from the Photograph

While preparing a photographic display for an eighty-fifth birthday in the family, Ishani is astonished to discover that Manjari Devi's face is absent from the old albums. Yet Manjari knows the dates, objects and arrangements associated with every family occasion. She has organised each celebration while remaining behind the camera herself. Ishani raises the question of this absence. In a new family photograph, Manjari is placed where her face can be clearly seen. Her name is written beneath it without identifying her by any service performed or account kept. For the first time, she enters the family's visible history simply as herself.

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Story 283 · The Nameplate

The loose nameplate at the gate bears only the name of Shridhar Jha, a retired headmaster. While repairing it, the family finds behind the old plate a date written by Shailaja Devi, along with the dimensions of screws and traces of her care. Although a woman's labour has sustained the house, its outward identity has belonged solely to a man. The discussion of a new plate becomes a discussion of whose names deserve to appear. At last, Shridhar, Shailaja, Naveen and Archana are all named on the same plate. In the rain, Shailaja wipes it from one end to the other. Now every name can be seen equally.

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Story 284 · The Third Step

The veranda of Kedar Mishra's house has always had two steps. One night his wife Girija Devi, feeling her way with a walking stick, encounters a third; by daylight, it has disappeared. Other members of the family, too, sometimes see or touch the impossible extra step. Counting and measuring produce no certain explanation. Seeing Girija's difficulty with her knees, the family asks a mason to build a sloping ramp. The steps once again appear ordinary, but the tapping of Girija's stick leaves three small rings in the earth. Amid an inexplicable occurrence, a practical improvement has become permanent.

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Story 285 · The Calendar in Reverse

The date has been fixed for selling the old house and moving to a new one. While sorting their belongings, Neelmani Jha begins to see impossible dates on the calendar: '31 September', followed by '32 September'. Within this strange extension of time, unfinished decisions about leaving the house, an old chair, the basil shrine and other possessions charged with memory present themselves one by one. The family eventually moves, but the mystery of the extra calendar leaves remains unresolved. Dates proceed normally in the new house, while the impossible pages lie pressed away behind them. The inward time required to leave a home does not obey the calendar's straightforward arithmetic.

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Story 286 · Air from the Closed Room

An extraordinary current of air slips through a narrow crack in a room shut for three months during repairs. Though the season outside is Kartik, the air within sometimes carries the scent of spring blossoms, sometimes the heat of high summer, the damp of the monsoon or the chill of winter. Shivkant, Malati, Meera and the mason look for an explanation; whenever the door is opened, that particular season vanishes. The experience persists even after the repairs. One winter night Malati feels warm air passing through the crack in the closed wooden door, but does not open it. The mystery endures precisely because its uncertainty is left undisturbed.

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Story 287 · A Shadow Without an Owner

At noon in Madhubani market, a human-shaped shadow appears regularly in motion, although there is no body to cast it. Sulochana and the other shopkeepers observe its direction and pace, and the way it behaves among light and shade. The shadow does not climb over objects; at times it breaks apart in a patch of brightness before joining itself together again. At first people search fearfully for its owner. Later they learn its route and adjust their daily movements. Understanding it no longer seems necessary. Among all the familiar shadows cast by familiar bodies in the market moves one shadow that follows a path of its own.

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Story 288 · The Station Absent from the Map

On his regular railway journey, Prabhakar Mishra, a records clerk, sees an unfamiliar station called Kadambbari between two stations he knows well. Railway maps, enquiries and other passengers' accounts offer no proof that it exists. More strangely, it can be seen only through a particular gap beside the fourth window of one carriage, and a camera cannot capture it. Later, even when that carriage stands motionless in the railway yard, Kadambbari remains visible through the same window. Prabhakar crosses out the station's dot on his sketch map and draws a small rectangle representing the window instead. The place exists less upon a map than within the strange limits of seeing.

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Story 289 · The Clock That Chimed Halfway

The wall clock in Devanand Mishra's house sometimes stops in the middle of striking the hour. During that half-chimed moment, ordinary actions—a door being closed, a thread being pulled, a betel leaf being folded, a drop of water falling—remain unfinished. Movement resumes when the chime is completed. The family tries counting and recording these extraordinary intervals of time. Even the thought of repairing the clock cannot dispel the mystery of what they have experienced. In her notebook Vaidehi writes 'half-chimed' in place of an ordinary date. The story opens a strange interval between the measurement of time and its lived experience.

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Story 290 · The Second Door

One day a second door appears of its own accord in the western wall of Mahendra Jha's rented flat. When it is opened, it reveals whichever room in the home happens at that moment to be empty; as soon as someone enters that room, the view changes. At first the family makes curious use of the door, but the prospect of unwanted glimpses into private rooms soon becomes troubling. When they prepare to move, the emptied rooms continue to appear through it as the furniture is taken away. The family leaves for a new home, while the question of what that second door can see remains unanswered in the abandoned flat.

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Story 291 · The Lane That Changed Its Name

Each morning the blue street sign in a lane of Madhubani displays a different name: sometimes Neem Lane, sometimes Kamala Road, sometimes Shital Lane or Chandni Lane. Covering the sign and sealing it make no difference. Ira Jha keeps a record of the changing names, but yesterday's name gradually becomes uncertain even in people's memories. The house numbers and the objects along the lane remain in place; its name and the sound of that name do not. Ira draws a small plan of the neighbourhood, knowing that a place cannot be held in memory by its name alone. Throughout the mystery, ordinary life in the lane continues.

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Story 292 · One Window Too Many

Vaidehi and Nilabh decide to sell their old house, which has three windows. Suddenly a fourth appears in the estate agent's photographs and the printed sales brochure, although the actual wall still has only three. The disagreement between image and house confuses prospective buyers. Some newer photographs show three windows, while the old printed copies retain four. Eventually another family takes possession of the house and Vaidehi moves to a smaller home. Her daughter Aparna preserves the two images side by side, with a blank sheet between them. The contradiction between what is seen and what exists is never resolved.

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Story 293 · The Room of Voices

After a tenant leaves, a room in Raghunath Jha's house falls vacant. Voices begin to be heard from it, speaking words that the next tenants will actually utter several days later. The wonder is that, once a sentence has been overheard in advance, the person who heard it cannot hear it again when it is spoken in the present. Raghunath must choose between the temptation to hear the future in full and the fear of losing the experience of the present. When the new family arrives, he refuses to listen beforehand to the rest of an unfinished sentence. At last the room fills with real voices, and he can hear an entire conversation as it happens.

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Story 294 · Bus Number Zero

With her temporary employment over, Ishani Mishra stands at an old bus stop at night. Three roads remain open to her: return to her mother's home, stay with a colleague, or accept a new job in Purnia. An extraordinary bus arrives bearing the number 'Zero'; its stops seem to change in response to the passengers' decisions, whether vague or firmly made. Listening to the experiences of the others, Ishani realises that the bus cannot bear the burden of choosing for her. She gets off at a stop and resolves to take the next step herself. A reply about the new appointment is still awaited, but she no longer runs from the question of where she wishes to go.

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Story 295 · A Rain of Paper

With the season's first raincloud, paper begins to fall upon Laheriasarai instead of water. Sentences that people have crossed out, corrected or rejected descend from the sky as sheets of writing. In fear, people stop striking out their mistakes, and both writing and decisions grow corrupted. Later, a real shower soaks the heaps of paper. Nandu, a printer, crosses out an incorrect date and writes the correct one, encouraged by Vibha to make the correction. Sheets continue to fall, but the act of correcting is not abandoned. The visible spectacle of past mistakes is not allowed to become a greater fear than the duty to put things right.

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Story 296 · The Pond on the Map

An old municipal land map shows Matiyahi Pond, but no trace of it survives in the open ground of the present day. While planning a drainage channel, Mridula Karn notices an uncanny connection between the blue pond on the map and water in the actual landscape. As a corner of the map fades, water begins to appear in the corresponding part of the field. Officials and local residents alter their habits in response to the movement of the water. At last the southern portion of the original map turns white, and a small pond emerges in the earth behind a tea stall. Paper and land continue to change one another's forms.

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Story 297 · The Reversed Reflection

One morning Meera notices that her reflection in the mirror performs an action different from, or contrary to, that of her body. Gradually it becomes apparent that the reflection is not always copying her in the present: sometimes it completes an old, unfinished gesture only much later. The family covers the mirror, tests it and waits, observing its peculiar behaviour. A farewell wave made months before is completed in the reflection long afterwards. Meera smiles and walks back inside, but in the mirror her smile has yet to appear. The time inhabited by her image has parted company with the time of her life.

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Story 298 · The Wednesday That Vanished

On Tuesday night all five members of Sudhanshu's family sit down to dinner; the next morning arrives as Thursday. Wednesday has disappeared from the family's experience, although everyone outside the house has lived through it. Investigating the anomaly, they discover that Wednesday returns in its proper place if one chair at the table is left vacant on Tuesday night. They begin taking turns on the low wooden seats and leaving one space unoccupied. The sequence of days resumes. Richa understands that the trouble was not Wednesday's empty chair, but their insistence on filling every place on Tuesday night.

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Story 299 · The Fifth Corner

From outside, the room in Saroj Mishra's ancestral house where the family keeps its papers is square. Inside, however, an impossible fifth corner slowly begins to grow. As the family discusses dividing the house and reckons the ownership of old possessions, they take measurements: the outer wall remains straight while the inner angle shifts. Their experiments show that the corner stops growing whenever someone sits within it. At last Saroj puts aside the chalk used for measuring, draws a low wooden seat into the corner and opens a book. Rather than continue trying to count an indefinable space, she chooses to inhabit it.

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Story 300 · An Unfamiliar Home of His Own

Returning after three days away, Vinay Jha finds that familiar objects have changed places throughout his home. The key, the lock and the house itself are the same, but the arrangement of bedding, spice tins, chairs and cupboards feels strange. Night after night he measures and records the changes, until he begins to see that some of these arrangements accord with the old wishes and memories of other members of the family. The house is not merely a reflection of his private habits. In the end he sits in a chair placed in its new position and draws an empty chair a little closer. He begins to accept his own home with its uncertainties.

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Story 301 · The Bell That Never Rang

As Madhavi and her daughter Ira prepare to sell their ancestral house in Laheriasarai, they discover the mystery of a strange bell at the front door. It makes no sound, yet each press of its button causes a lived event in the house to vanish from both their memories. The tile fixed the wrong way round, the rail installed to support the grandfather, and an incident that revealed the mother's affection gradually become unfamiliar to them. Written accounts can preserve the facts of these occurrences but not the feelings once attached to them. When they remove the bell, it disappears, only to reappear in its old place. In the end, instead of pressing it, Madhavi knocks three times on the door. The sound awakens a living childhood memory of her mother coming to open it.

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Story 302 · The Road That Turned Back

Archana Jha, a road surveyor, sets out near Benipur to examine an alternative route for use during floods. Yet whichever way she tries to go, the road circles back and deposits her at the gate of her ancestral home. Her distance meter, survey notebook and chalk markings are all correct, but none can explain what is happening. Jitan Miyan, an experienced driver, encounters the same impossible turning with her. Archana manages to get out by way of the railway line and the ridges between the fields, but every attempt to leave the house by road fails again. At last she understands that the bewilderment belongs to her journey, not to everyone else's. The road becomes her way of returning home, while the path along the rear field boundary becomes her separate way out into the world.

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Story 303 · The Other Night Sky

For a few minutes around midnight, Kailash Mandal, the night watchman at a school, sees unfamiliar constellations overhead. In place of the familiar Pole Star and Great Bear, he sees a tilted sickle and a ring of seven stars. A schoolgirl, Ragini, believes him and begins keeping regular observations and records. The teachers, too, witness the phenomenon, yet the sky remains ordinary through a telescope or on a mobile phone. Even its reflection in the pond does not change. After Ragini goes to Darbhanga for her studies, she checks by telephone from two different places: the sky before Kailash's eyes is different, but the instruments used by both show the same sky. The story leaves unresolved the distance between witnessed truth, measured evidence and the trust shared by two generations.

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Story 304 · The Woman Cutting Onions

Before her kitchen is rebuilt, Saroja Devi cuts onions on an old wooden board and recalls the decisions in her life that family conversations have largely forgotten. Moving the kitchen window, staying alone with the children during her daughter's examinations, opening a bank account in her own name and starting a women's savings group were all initiatives of her own. Her granddaughter Anu wants to write down five important events from her grandmother's life. In answering her, Saroja acknowledges for the first time the importance of the things she herself had considered small. The old chopping board is taken away, and the first mark of a knife appears on the new one. The beginning of the new kitchen becomes inseparable from this newly claimed sense of herself.

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Story 305 · The Bus Window

Returning home on an evening bus, Madhav Jha is disturbed by his reflection in the window. The face is his own, yet he cannot reconcile it with the person he feels himself to be. The carefully composed photograph taken for his office identity card seems far removed from the untidy image in the bus glass. At home, too, he catches himself involuntarily straightening his hair and chin before the mirror. Gradually he understands that he has been fashioning even his face to fit the gaze of others. On another bus journey he looks at his reflection without trying to improve it, and asks his wife to photograph him without advance warning. His unposed laughter seems more truly his than the carefully manufactured image.

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Story 306 · The Hour for Filling Water

Manjari has been selected for a three-month course in the preservation of government records. Yet she is about to write declining admission because filling water at home, helping her brother Anshu prepare for the day and looking after her ailing mother all fall upon her. Seeing her yellow bucket in the queue at the tap, she realizes that the responsibilities of the household need not be hers alone. She works out a division of tasks: her father can fetch water, her brother can look after his own lunchbox, medicine times can be rearranged, and help can be sought from a neighbour. Initial reluctance within the family slowly gives way to cooperation. In the end her father takes the bucket and joins the queue himself, while Manjari goes to find out the bus timetable. A way opens for her to take the training without abandoning the work of the home.

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Story 307 · The Empty Notebook

Retired teacher Govindkant Jha receives an invitation to write about his first day as a teacher for the school's centenary souvenir. The blank notebook unsettles him because the recorded date of his appointment is not the same as the moment when he truly became a teacher. Old registers, recollections and an incident involving a student from Bhutarang make him question the habit of judgment he had acquired through years of teaching. At first he crosses out and examines his lines with a red pen. Then he admits that understanding why a notebook is blank is harder than awarding a zero. Finally he decides to send the notebook with all its cancellations and additions, rather than a polished, self-congratulatory account. In its incompleteness he discovers something of his real experience as a teacher.

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Story 308 · The Broken Comb

While sorting old possessions before the house is repainted, Shailaja finds in her mother's tin a black comb with three broken teeth. It brings back what she believes is a childhood scene of her mother combing her hair. When she speaks to her mother, however, she learns that the black comb was kept not for hair but for untangling threads along the edge of a bedsheet; a red comb was the one used on her hair. Shailaja realizes that memory can mingle separate events. With the broken comb she begins straightening the fringe of an old sheet. At last it ceases to be an inert keepsake and becomes an instrument of work again; even the gaps left by its missing teeth prove useful.

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Story 309 · Hands Choosing Vegetables

For twenty-seven years Ramlochan Jha has chosen every brinjal, tomato and pointed gourd from the vegetable stall with extraordinary care. Reflecting on this market habit, he remembers decisions concerning his son Amresh's education and other family matters in which, even while saying 'It is your choice', he had narrowed other people's options through his own reasoning. This time he ventures to buy a blemished tomato and a crooked bottle gourd. In talking with his wife Malati, he begins to see that a choice must sometimes be made for oneself even when it may turn out badly. Slowly he learns to accept responsibility for his wishes instead of seeking flawless objects. The words 'What I want', written on the back of the shopping list, become the small sign of this change.

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Story 310 · Winter Sunlight

Janaki Devi tells the time of day by watching a strip of winter sunlight move across her window. For a school experiment, her granddaughter Kavya marks the sunlit spots on the floor and records the hours on a clock. Her grandmother helps, but one observation is missed and clouds obscure the light at another appointed time. Their anxiety to capture every moment precisely reminds Janaki of the old wall clock she had kept five minutes fast. Through the child's experiment she comes to understand that time continues even when sunlight cannot be seen; not every passing instant has to be recorded. By evening the marks on the floor have been wiped away. Janaki Devi begins to experience the night as possessing a life of its own, not merely as a wait for the next morning.

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Story 311 · The Milk Boiled Over

Pramila Devi knows her household so thoroughly that she can tell when the milk will rise, where everyone's belongings lie and when each person will need something. One day the milk boils over, astonishing the family. The small mishap exposes to her the burden of being the woman who is never supposed to make a mistake. She understands that her habit of taking care of everything for her husband and children has also deprived the others of chances to learn. The duties of making tea and watching the milk are gradually shared. The next day Meera prevents it from boiling over, but Pramila feels, alongside relief, a faint hurt at becoming less indispensable. She accepts the feeling and begins to learn to sit quietly for a few moments with her hands free.

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Story 312 · Before Opening the Envelope

Sudha Jha receives a letter from the college records office and is afraid to open it. For years she has placed the responsibility for abandoning her musical studies in her youth upon a single sentence spoken by her father. Searching through an old notebook of ragas and the college records, she discovers that the episode may not have been as clear as her long-held memory has made it. Even when the letter is opened, the truth remains inconclusive: how much was her father's prohibition, and how much her own fear? Speaking with her daughter Ira, Sudha admits for the first time that she does not remember exactly. She puts the music notebook and the archival letter away separately. She will no longer turn the unfinished history of that decision into one definitive accusation.

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Story 313 · White Hair in the Mirror

Madhavi Jha is startled to notice the first white hair on her head. In her husband's family she is usually called 'the younger one', 'mother' or by some other name denoting a relationship. When a shopkeeper who does not know her addresses her as 'Madhavi ji', hearing her personal name becomes an extraordinary experience. The white hair deepens her awareness that neither her body nor her identity is wholly defined by her family roles. She has no wish to pluck the hair out or dye it. Hearing her husband Arun address her by her own name brings her a different kind of pleasure. Everyday life at home goes on as before, but the name 'Madhavi' once again becomes for her the sign of an existence that is independently hers.

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Story 314 · The Empty Bowl

Nine-year-old Anshu is fond of his own bowl with the blue rim. When he eats rice and lentils from it, he initially thinks only of taste and a full stomach. But when his father's wages fail to arrive from the contractor, the family begins to fear a shortage of rice. Anshu starts to understand that rice being available in the shop and having the money to buy it are two different things. The measure of the grains left at home, the next day's meal and the subtraction problems he learns in school acquire a new meaning in his mind. The empty bowl no longer marks merely the end of a meal: it becomes a measure of uncertainty about the days ahead. Anshu begins to learn the difference between hunger and want.

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Story 315 · The Bird at the Window

Prabha Jha's household runs by fixed times and an exact order. A small loose corner of the kitchen window's mesh has been awaiting repair for so long that the job is continually postponed. A bird comes to the window and plays with that corner, turning Prabha's attention towards the severity of the rules governing her day. Even in a sheet of paper made by her daughter Naina, she is identified chiefly as the 'mother' who does the work. Prabha thinks that order is necessary, but it need not make every moment compulsory. She stitches only as much of the mesh as is needed, serves the meal five minutes late and leaves a clean bowl to dry overnight. In these small pauses she finds a new space within her own time.

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Story 316 · One Word Wrong

After eye surgery, the elder sister Saroj comes to stay with Vasudha. Following their parents' deaths in childhood, Saroj had brought Vasudha up and seen to her schooling. During a conversation Saroj inadvertently says udhaar, 'debt', in place of aadhaar, 'support'. The slip makes Vasudha begin to see their relationship in terms of loans, sacrifice and accounts. Old school fees, Saroj's bangles, worries over money and the reversal of dependence in the present all return to the surface. Gradually Vasudha sees that affection may contain fear, expense, habit and help; one word cannot hold the whole of its meaning. Instead of treating her sister with a new sense of guilt, she learns to understand the human difficulties Saroj has borne. The old accounts remain, but no new account is opened in the name of 'Didi'.

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Story 317 · New Sandals

Urmila Jha takes her worn sandals to be stitched once more, but the cobbler points out that the left sole has worn down more on one side. When she tries on new sandals, she begins to notice her gait, the narrow passage through the house and her habit of twisting her body to avoid a basket of utensils. She realizes that the body does not merely choose its routes; it also reshapes itself around the obstacles along them. Walking in the new sandals slowly teaches her to attend to the way she moves. The old pair is kept for work in the back of the house. In the end, instead of bending her body sideways in the passage, she moves the basket out of the way. A small adjustment opens up the possibility of changing the space around her, and not merely her own way of walking.

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Story 318 · The Silence of the Afternoon

After Sunday lunch everyone in the house falls asleep, but Saumya cannot. When an attempt to read fails, she wanders through the rooms and at last lies down on the empty floor of the sitting room. Amid the sound of the fan, the coolness of the floor and a blue button lying under the divan, she experiences a silence in which she is required neither to do something for anyone nor to offer an immediate answer. The silence does not make her rebellious; it simply allows her a moment in which to discover her own wishes. By evening the familiar household tasks have resumed, but the next day she can say plainly that she wants to rest before beginning her studies. 'Doing nothing', too, has become a meaningful portion of her own time.

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Story 319 · The Splitting Fingernail

A crack develops in the nail of the index finger on Vibha's right hand. The discomfort it causes in writing and domestic work leads the school clerk to begin using her left hand. A conversation with her mother reveals that as a child Vibha wrote with her left hand, until practice compelled her to learn to write with the right. Between the old competence of her neat handwriting and the natural ease she had forgotten, she begins thinking about her own identity. She does not blame her family; instead she considers how habit and inclination work upon each other. At school a new child writes his name with his left hand, and his father does not stop him. Watching the different work her two hands can do, Vibha returns to writing the register with a changed understanding.

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Story 320 · The Scent of Cut Fruit

In the workers' quarters in Doha, Aniruddh Jha learns from his companions how to cut a pineapple. At home his mother or his wife Neelima would usually have cut the fruit for him; abroad, amid a shared kitchen, exhaustion after work and friendship, the small task becomes his own practice. When he returns to his village, the smell of pineapple recalls not his ancestral courtyard but the friends, fan and shared plate in Doha. He understands that a home is not only one's birthplace: it can also be made of the people one lives with, labour, responsibility and little tasks repeated day after day. Cutting fruit among his mother, Neelima and Ishan, he makes not three portions but four. The last is for a neighbour's child, and the shared food joins together memories of his several homes.

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Story 321 · Beneath the Fan

Laid up with a fever, Jaynarayan Mishra spends the day counting the rotations of a blue mark on one blade of the ceiling fan. Every revolution seems identical to the last, and the distinctions between the days begin to disappear. His wife Sharada reminds him, however, that the daily medicines, meals, need for support and small improvements in his health are all different. Waiting for their son Nachiketa's arrival also gives fresh meaning to the fan's apparently unchanging circles. When he grows stronger he walks as far as the veranda and feels the air outdoors. He returns to bed and looks at the fan again, but no longer feels compelled to count each turn: he has begun to perceive change within repetition.

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Story 322 · A Half-Written Name

Renuka Mishra takes shelter from the rain in the municipal reading room and, while filling out a membership form, begins almost unconsciously to write her daughter Aditi's name. Years of completing school, competition and application forms for her daughters have trained the movement of her hand. Crossing out the unfinished 'Adi' and writing her own full name, she turns her attention towards her personal interests. Though she has taught her daughter to manage her own papers, Renuka's hand has not let go of its old habit. She reflects on the different meanings of earlier applications and signatures. Finally she joins the reading room in her own name and chooses a book by an unfamiliar writer. The sheet bearing the crossed-out name remains for her less a mistake than the trace of an old relationship in her life.

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Story 323 · Before the Lamp Goes Out

A line drawn across the documents dividing the ancestral house is transferred to the courtyard as a line of white chalk. Naresh's and Mahesh's families agree to the arrangement for financial clarity, but Kusum slowly realizes that the line divides more than land: it also divides their common sitting space, the children's study and the glow of the evening lamp. Once the wall is built, movement between the two halves becomes difficult. Kusum and the others look for ways of leaving some passages open to each other's needs. Water can flow through a gap left by three bricks at the bottom, and Tanvi's book can rest on top of the wall. As the lamp goes out, darkness falls on both halves of the divided house, yet some bonds of their shared life remain unclosed.

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Story 324 · Red Dust

Nayan is flying a blue kite from the roof when, below, a dispute over a field boundary intensifies between his father Nandkishore and Ramanand. The surveyor's measuring cord and the quarrelling crowd raise red dust into which the kite string becomes entangled. Nayan goes down into the field to look for his kite; he cannot fully grasp the competing claims of land ownership. Following its string across several parts of the field, he reaches the torn blue paper. The kite is broken, but one bamboo spar and the string have survived. Back at home Nayan ties a knot in the line so that he can make another kite. The colour of the dust remains an uncertain sign of that day's dispute.

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Story 325 · The Three-Minute Procession

A procession enters a narrow lane in Shivmath for barely three minutes, but in the crush of the crowd milk is spilled, Sakina Chachi's guavas are trampled and the connection to the public tap is broken. Ramsevak the carpenter, Nasim, Sakina and Jhilmil separately take stock of the harm done in the lane. A child's abandoned sandal and scraps of paper left behind prolong the presence of the event. Jhilmil points out the difference in time: the procession has gone in three minutes, but the work it leaves behind continues for much longer. The tap is repaired by evening, yet the missing milk, crushed guavas, orphaned sandal and lingering stains show how long a brief political demonstration can remain in ordinary people's lives.

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Story 326 · The Torn Drum

At Sonbarsa's spring festival, the old drum is in the care of Ganeshi Paswan. His son Mohan urges him to replace its weakened skin, but Ganeshi wants to preserve the sound of the old instrument. During the celebration, amid the pull of ropes and many hands, the skin tears. At once different groups begin blaming one another. Ganeshi takes the drum home; later the torn skin is stitched and hung in the school without naming anyone as the culprit. The children ask different questions about what happened. A drum fitted with new skin sounds again, but the stitched old skin reminds them that a rupture may come suddenly although tensions have been gathering behind it for a long time.

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Story 327 · The Truck at Night

On a truck carrying relief supplies through the flood at night, every passenger has a different worry. Saroj, the driver, fears erosion along the road; Dhanauti Kaki is anxious about the goat left behind at home; Ranjana tries to save her papers and ink; others are preoccupied with their families, earnings and the accounting of relief. When the wheels threaten to sink, several sacks are unloaded and Budhan probes the road ahead with a bamboo pole. Working together, they get the truck across the damaged stretch. Relief is distributed at Barhampur, while some sacks remain for the next journey. The passage reveals how a single calamity contains many private fears, though a safe way through it must be made together.

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Story 328 · Flowers upon the Ashes

Fire has reduced the house of Rambabu Sah in Dharampur to ruin. His seven-year-old grandson Neeraj keeps looking in the burnt courtyard for his broken flowerpot and the earth it held. With Tejnath Kaka's help, the children clear away ashes, turn the soil, mix in manure and sow seeds. Tejnath explains that ash alone will not make flowers grow: work, suitable soil and time are all necessary. As the new house takes shape, marigolds and an unknown red flower bloom in the bed. Neeraj cannot say for certain what plant has sprung up where his grandmother's old seeds once lay, yet he does not pull it out. Beside the destructive memory of the fire, life begins carefully to flourish again.

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Story 329 · The Blacksmith's Hammer

Madhavi, the daughter of Jagdish the blacksmith, has learned since childhood to work the forge, bellows and hammer. When her marriage is arranged, expectations from the groom's family and talk of a possible demand for a motorcycle bring tension into the household. The groom, Raghav, comes to the smithy himself and makes it clear that he wants no such demand. Jagdish hands him tongs for holding hot iron and tests him in his own way. At the farewell he gives his daughter a small hammer made to suit her grip. Remembering her father's old injunction, 'Keep your grip straight', Madhavi leaves for her new home. There, seeing a loose nail at the window, she takes up the hammer herself rather than waiting for a carpenter. She has brought her hard-won skill with her.

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Story 330 · The Glass of the Lantern

In Basahiya market, grocer Suresh Sahu and tailor Rahim Ansari are neighbours of many years, despite their frequent small disagreements. On a night when the electricity fails, a rumour of communal violence spreads through the market and frightens everyone. In fact, the panic caused by the rumour overturns a handcart, makes an elderly man fall and causes some damage. Suresh burns his hand saving Rahim's lantern, and the line of an existing crack in its glass lengthens. By morning it is clear that there has been no great fire or riot, yet to say that 'nothing happened' would be false as well. Rahim does not replace the glass at once. That evening light from the cracked lantern falls upon both shops, carrying the shared memory of rumour, fear and neighbourly fellowship.

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Story 331 · Beneath the Bridge

On the day of the new bridge's inauguration, flags flutter, speeches are delivered and a platform stands ready above. Below its seventh pillar, however, Vimala, Bisesar and their children live beneath a tarpaulin. Bisesar himself worked as a labourer on the bridge, yet his family, displaced by its construction, has never received the resettlement they were promised. Their daughter Kajal, preparing for her examinations, asks why the names and rights of the workers who built the bridge have not been properly recorded. A strip cut from the ceremonial red ribbon ends up tied to little Chhotu's toy car. Bisesar wishes, above all, to have his own name entered correctly. As vehicles begin crossing the bridge that night, the family sets an old doorframe beneath it to give their shelter something of the appearance of a home. The bridge has joined two banks, but the question of those who live beneath it remains unanswered.

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Story 332 · Paper and the Stick

At Sonbarsa, a dispute flares over the possession of land between Harinarayan's field and a parcel granted to Sarita, the widowed wife of Ramvilas Paswan. A government order, an old land document, the boundary ridge, the threat of a stick and the soil under cultivation all seem to support different claims. An old map preserved in the village school, together with traces of a silted-up watercourse, makes a fresh survey possible. It becomes clear that Sarita's legally allotted land lies not in the standing paddy but on the fallow strip to the south, where part of a cattle shed must be removed. Mahesh takes down that part of the shed. Rather than stand by and watch his humiliation, Sarita chooses to stay away. The boundaries are eventually marked correctly. The incident shows that turning a right written on paper into justice upon the ground demands mutual understanding.

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Story 333 · The Scent of Jackfruit

A rumour about a small quarrel at the bus stand spreads through Sonbarsa market until it becomes a fear shared by the whole community. Grocer Mahendra Sahu and his neighbour Nasim Miyan, too, grow wary. When a noise arises from Nasim's courtyard that night, people immediately suspect trouble; Mahendra, however, recognizes the smell of jackfruit and realizes that a ripe fruit or a fallen branch may have caused the disturbance. Together the neighbours remove the fallen branch. By morning it emerges that the tales attaching religion and caste to the original quarrel were groundless. Nasim's family sends the remaining jackfruit to Mahendra's house, while a young man named Binod helps the two households. The smell is unchanged, but its meaning has altered as fear recedes. What had seemed a warning of danger becomes an ordinary sign of neighbourhood life.

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Story 334 · The Rumour of Five Shots

Two or three sharp reports are heard in the lane by the old post office. Chhotu runs off crying, 'Five shots!' One person makes the number six, another seven, until the rumour brings fear, shuttered shops and a stampede to the market. Those who claim to be eyewitnesses have, in truth, heard the noises but seen no gunfire. The police find no direct evidence of bullets; a blown transformer fuse and firecrackers from a wedding house offer explanations for the sounds. Even so, the tale continues to travel with a different number attached to it each time. Its consequences are real enough for Pawan, worried about his broken bottle of milk, and for people unable to buy their medicine. By morning the figures scrawled on the wall are erased, but different numbers of imaginary 'shots' survive in people's memories.

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Story 335 · The Torn Flag

On the day of a political procession, flags from rival groups arrive for repair at Shanti Devi's little tailoring shop in the old market. With the torn cloth come the strain that ripped it, rusted wire and the political meanings attached to its colour. Shanti Devi does not mend the flag of one side before the other; she begins with whichever piece of fabric is most badly torn. Her daughter Rekha observes that, to a needle, the important thing is the place where the cloth has split. The young men worry about whether the patches will show, while Shanti Devi is concerned with stitching that will hold. By evening, when the uproar around the flags has subsided, school shirts, aprons and sacks for grain become urgent again. Threads of several colours, still useful for ordinary work, lie side by side in the same box.

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Story 336 · The Imprint of a Boot

Police searching for stolen copper wire arrive at the house of Harinath Sahu, who repairs bicycles. They turn his belongings upside down, leave muddy boot prints behind and break the marigold planted beside the sacred basil. A boot also stamps the mathematics notebook of his twelve-year-old daughter, Revati. Later the real thief is caught and Harinath's innocence is established. Yet the neighbours' suspicion and the humiliation suffered by the family do not vanish with the official correction. Revati draws a pencil line around the muddy mark in her notebook and preserves it. 'What if someone comes back and says nothing happened?' she asks. Rain washes the footprints away from the courtyard, but the one on the page remains carefully bounded and measurable: a child's record of an injury that an acquittal alone cannot erase.

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Story 337 · The Boat in the Night

During a night of flooding, the exhausted boatman Jagarnath Mallah takes his boat out once more: Sunita, a pregnant woman trapped in her house, must be carried immediately to safety. While people are boarding, a cry for help comes from Harinarayan's family. In the fierce current, deciding whom to rescue first becomes an agonizing matter. Jagarnath gets Sunita to a raised platform, signals his intention and turns the boat towards Harinarayan's home, bringing out the family and their feverish child. At daybreak he helps other stranded people as well. Afterwards the villagers debate whether he chose rightly. Jagarnath knows that decisions made in darkness and floodwater cannot be judged apart from the space in the boat, its load, the current and the little time available. Each new crossing changes the possibilities of the next.

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Story 338 · A Shard of Glass

An accident at night shatters the front pane of Harinath's spectacles shop. Responsibility for the collision, the cost of replacement and the danger posed by broken glass must all be dealt with. His eight-year-old daughter Meera, however, discovers that a worn, safely rounded piece of the old thick glass reveals a slender band of colour when sunlight strikes it. The new pane is fitted and the damage accounted for separately, but the harmless fragment is kept for study. Day after day Meera waits for the sun to reach the right angle. Her father explains that some broken things must be thrown away, some can be repaired, and some come to serve another purpose. The old glass is not made into a celebration of the accident. It becomes instead a means of learning about light and the care with which damaged objects must be handled.

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Story 339 · The Field Turned to Ash

A fire in the night reduces Ramlochan Yadav's wheat crop to ash. At dawn, before anything else, he tries to find the field's former boundaries, for the uniform layer of cinders has obliterated the ridges and irrigation channels. With neighbouring farmers he restores the markers and requests an official inspection. Whenever a measurement proves mistaken, he has it corrected at once. When the first compensation record omits eight kathas of land, he again asks for a revision. The payment cannot make good the whole loss, but it helps him obtain new seed and fertilizer. The ashes are turned back into the earth, and sowing begins anew. The preservation of the true boundaries becomes the foundation of rebuilding, a necessary act of accuracy amid devastation.

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Story 340 · A Watch Without a Gun

Jagat Sahu, the ageing watchman of the cooperative seed store, carries no gun. He has a brass whistle, a set of keys and a habit of reading the records carefully. One night several men produce an old paper and try to take sacks of seed from the store. Jagat notices that the serial numbers do not agree. He blows an unusual pattern on his whistle, bringing the watchman from a neighbouring post to his aid. An inquiry the next day uncovers the irregularity. Members of the committee propose giving Jagat a gun; he asks instead for a working light bulb, a proper drain and a rule requiring two authorized signatures. His vigilance does not rest on pretending there is no danger. It rests on communal alertness, verifiable records and responsibility. The whistle's answering call in the dark is the real reassurance of his system of security.

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Story 341 · A Song Through the Smoke

Fire breaks out in the village's old paddy storehouse, and people rush about with buckets in confusion. Sabita Devi begins to hum a familiar rice-planting tune, bringing the passing hands into a common rhythm. When Chhotan is found trapped inside, she keeps singing so that he can hear that help is close. Dinesh and Javed cut through the bamboo of a window and bring him out. By dawn the villagers are assessing the loss, saving what seed remains and investigating the cause of the fire. Sabita makes one point clear: the song did not put out the flames; water and human labour did. The tune merely gave their cooperation a steady pace. Some days later the same melody is heard in the fields again, restored to the ordinary words and work from which it came.

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Story 342 · One Minute of Electricity

A torrential downpour cuts the power at the district's old hospital, leaving patients and staff distressed in the dark. Nurse Malati manages the ward by the light of a hand-held lamp and the discipline of familiar routines. A generator runs for just one minute, long enough for patients to see their beds and the faces of those they love. When the lights go out again, someone notices that one bed is empty. A search reveals that Ramcharit Mandal has fallen while going to fetch water. Once he is brought back safely, Malati introduces a regular roll call, checking every patient by name. That single minute of illumination has brought more than temporary comfort: it has exposed a weakness in the ward's arrangements for keeping people safe when the lights fail.

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Story 343 · Not Blood, but Vermilion

At the market beside the temple road, a bicycle strikes a bamboo rack. A packet of vermilion belonging to Malati Devi bursts, spreading red powder across the pavement; her son Ratan also suffers a small scratch on his elbow. Seeing the red stain, the crowd takes it for blood and begins circulating rumours of a beating. People who witnessed the collision and those who have only heard about it tell quite different stories. Eventually the facts are sorted out: there were only two drops of blood; almost all the red was vermilion. The cyclist apologizes, and arrangements are discussed for repairing the rack. When the rumour resurfaces the following day, Ratan corrects it with what he actually saw. The incident reveals how a slight accident can swell into an alarming public event when words are allowed to change the evidence.

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Story 344 · My Magnificent Business

At the Wednesday market in Pachrukhi, the narrator launches what he calls his 'magnificent business': for one rupee he will number and safely keep each customer's bundle. His wife Saroja has already seen the weaknesses in his accounts, but he regards the scheme as an innovation. Then rain wets the labels, the numbers become illegible, bundles are mixed up and a water pitcher goes missing. Compensation, together with the price of a tarpaulin, makes the boast of profit absurd. The enterprise closes, though market-goers learn to mark their own bundles with distinctive signs. The narrator announces that the financial loss proves the triumph of his idea. The comedy lies in the gulf between his speeches about greatness and Saroja's unromantic reckoning of what the venture has actually cost.

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Story 345 · A Wedding Party, Three Times Over

Setting out for a cousin's wedding in Amhi, the narrator follows what he thinks are reliable landmarks: a red canopy, a pond and the sound of drums. Again and again they lead him into the wrong wedding procession. At ceremonies in Belahi and Sonbarsa, strangers receive him as a relative; he adjusts his account of who he is to fit the situation and finds himself entangled in food, music and introductions. At last he learns to ask directly for the village and the bride's name. When he reaches the right wedding, he finds there some of the people he met at the first two, and everyone laughs at his adventures. His conclusion is that identical festive decorations and familiar-sounding names are poor guides. To find the way to one's own people, one must first know clearly whom one is looking for.

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Story 346 · The Philosopher of Credit

Gopal Sahu hangs a sign outside his shop declaring 'No Credit' and formulates a hundred principles against selling on account. Yet whenever an impoverished customer needs provisions, he calls the loan a 'social circumstance' and enters it in his ledger. His daughter Kusum points out the contradiction between his eloquence and the mounting sums owed to him. When payment to a wholesaler comes due, Gopal has to put the customers' accounts in order and recover what he can. His final principle is that credit should be recorded plainly rather than concealed beneath grand expressions. The sign changes to 'Keep Your Credit Accounts Clear.' Even so, Gopal declares that the fee for his wisdom may be paid later. His philosophy survives, complete with the joke it has always made of itself.

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Story 347 · The Panchayat's Expert

At Bardaha, the panchayat meets to plan a drain that will stop water collecting in front of the school. Batesar Kaka offers expert advice on every subject without taking a single measurement. Mason Raghunandan checks the actual gradient, although a memory of an old culvert supplied by Batesar proves unexpectedly useful. Later Malati Devi, who cooks at the school, recalls where ashes once used to be dumped, enabling the builders to find a safer turn for the drain. The work is completed successfully, but Batesar records all these contributions in his notebook as evidence of his own 'expertise.' At the next panchayat meeting he is already present to advise, with equal confidence, on vaccinating goats. The story draws its comedy from the difference between knowledge that proves useful in practice and the boast of knowing everything.

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Story 348 · My Rich Uncle

The family considers Uncle Nandkishore immensely wealthy: he talks on a grand scale, seems generous and keeps a thick book of accounts. When Grandmother's leaking roof has to be repaired, the difference between his capital and his debts becomes apparent. The narrator learns that a bulky ledger can record unfinished obligations just as readily as prosperity. Yet the uncle proves resourceful in the repairs, economizing, reusing sound materials and showing a practical understanding of the work. When the roof is finished, he reads out his personal debts before the family and begins paying them off in small instalments. Everyone continues to call him the 'rich uncle,' though the phrase now holds a different knowledge of money, trust, indebtedness and family ties. His supposed wealth can no longer be separated from the irony of those obligations.

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Story 349 · The Statement of a Missing Goat

When Dhauri, Budhni Kaki's easily recognized goat, disappears from her tether, villagers offer confident theories of theft, jackals and a trader's conspiracy. A girl named Malati notices grains of bran scattered on the ground and follows the trail they make. It leads to an old oil mill, where the goat has become trapped while dragging its loosened tethering stake behind it. Even after Dhauri is recovered unharmed, the village 'experts' struggle to prove their guesses were somehow correct. The statement finally entered in the panchayat record confines itself to the visible physical traces and the place where the animal was found. Malati's question—'Where has the bran fallen?'—becomes a new standard in the village for testing claims made with certainty but without evidence.

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Story 350 · The Mobile-Phone Guru

Raghunath Babu, a retired postman, teaches the elderly people of his village to use mobile phones safely. His rule is simple: read first, press afterwards; beware of unfamiliar messages and never share a secret code. One day the teacher himself forgets the passcode to his device. Rather than laugh at him, his pupils remind him of the precautions he has taught them. In Raghunath's old postman's bag they find the account-recovery details he has kept safely, and with authorized assistance the phone is opened again. At the next lesson he teaches the importance of admitting when one has forgotten something. Rasida Khala, in turn, reminds him of the rule against showing anyone one's secret code. Learning now passes in both directions between the teacher and his pupils.

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Story 351 · The Wedding Budget

To prevent needless expense at his daughter Kumud's wedding, Navalkishore Jha sets a ceiling of seventy thousand rupees. Almost every small decision—the number of guests to feed, the wedding pavilion, decoration and sweets—requires another family meeting. Uncle Govind keeps the accounts, Phulo Kaki argues for tradition, and the cook Nathuni Maharaj advises preparing food for the number of people actually expected. At last the wedding takes place within the prescribed limit, with less food wasted than usual. But when Govind totals the final accounts, he reveals the cost of the tea, samosas, jalebis and samples of sweet cakes consumed during all those budget meetings. Kumud, now married, writes a rule into the ledger: at the next wedding, hold the planning meetings after everyone has eaten. The discussions meant to reduce feasting had become a feast of their own.

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Story 352 · The Great Poet Next Door

The narrator is tormented by the endless recitations of his neighbour Batuknath Jha, who believes himself a great poet. He promises to read only two lines and goes on for hours. Seeking refuge in the cattle shed, the narrator discovers that the poet will follow him even there. Eventually the listeners learn to shell peas, pick stones from pigeon peas and attend to household tasks while the verses continue. At a literary evening in the library, the narrator asks Batuknath plainly to restrict himself to two pages. To everyone's surprise, the poet reads a short and pleasing poem and receives genuine applause. The narrator realizes that, in spite of all his evasions, several lines from the interminable earlier readings have lodged in his memory. Beneath the satire of literary vanity lies an unexpected relationship between hearing and literature.

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Story 353 · The Scholar for Rent

Gopikant Jha, a retired clerk, considers himself an authority on every subject. Nilambar Jha, who rents a room in his house while researching local wedding songs and domestic labour, must endure frequent advice and hints that his landlord's name ought to appear in the research. Many of Gopikant's claims are ridiculous. One day, however, a memory of his mother concerning the 'seventh post' gives Nilambar a valuable lead. He checks the account independently with other elderly women and presents it, with supporting evidence, at his oral examination. The degree is awarded in the researcher's name alone, but the acknowledgements record Gopikant's assistance. The landlord frames a copy of the line and announces that he will advise future tenants on research without charge. The rent on the room, however, remains unchanged.

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Story 354 · The Village Meteorologist

Harinarayan Kaka of Sonbarsa predicts the weather by studying ants, egrets, leaves and the wind. His forecasts are often wrong, yet the villagers continue asking for them each day. Aniruddh and Malati begin keeping separate records of the predictions, the weather that actually follows and the work people undertake in response. They discover that, even when they mistrust Kaka's forecast, his words prompt them to protect sacks of grain, clear drains and repair their roofs. On one occasion he declares that there will be no rain. The village, already cautious, prepares in time; that night the rain arrives. Kaka's 'meteorology' is no dependable science of prediction, but it has become a spur to readiness. As Malati puts it, Kaka does not give them the answer; he raises the question.

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Story 355 · Free Advice

Maheshwar Jha is famous at Belahi crossroads for the advice he gives without charge. In every dispute he asks three questions: What are the facts? What is conjecture? What small, useful action can be taken at once? Yet when the wall of his own kitchen begins to lean, he forgets his principles and blames his neighbour Kalavati for the water collecting there. The villagers shower him with advice, until Pappu the mason investigates. He discovers that a blocked drain, neem roots and an incorrect slope have caused water to gather at the foot of the wall. Once proper drainage is provided, the wall is saved and Kalavati is shown to be blameless. Maheshwar adds a new line to his notice: hiding the facts of your own difficulty does not change them. Advice acquires its true worth only when tested in one's own life.

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Story 356 · Election Tea

During the election campaign Kailash Sahu serves tea to workers from every political party. Each group interprets his hospitality as proof of his support, but Kailash refuses to tell anyone how he will vote. He maintains a careful account of the cups served and the money owed under each party's name. After polling is over and the result declared, both the victors and the defeated return to his shop, each claiming him as an ally. Rather than reveal the secret of his ballot, Kailash reads out the outstanding sums. The workers abandon their political quarrel long enough to settle the bills. The story satirizes election-time opportunism through a clear distinction: a citizen's vote is private, whereas the accounts of a tea shop, and the debts recorded in them, are matters to be paid in public.

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Story 357 · Uncle with the Microphone

At the school's fiftieth-anniversary celebration, Bhuvaneshwar Kaka cannot resist turning every announcement into a long speech. Necessary information disappears beneath his words. Headmistress Nirmala Devi institutes a rule that announcements must be no longer than twelve words. Kaka finds the limit uncomfortable at first, but discovers the force of brevity when he has to give directions from the stage, call for a grandmother bringing medicine and summon his grandson Sonu. In the middle of the programme the microphone loses power, and the pupils perform their play without it. Kaka comes to understand that making a voice louder is not always what matters; knowing what must be said, and to whom, matters more. By the end of the celebration, his announcements have acquired clarity instead of display.

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Story 358 · A Kilogram of Reputation

In the market, Madhav Sahu's gleaming yellow one-kilogram weight is the emblem of his shop's reputation. He trusts its accuracy because of its shine and the renown it has enjoyed for years. Questions from his granddaughter Gauri, followed by a rival trader Nathuni's remark, lead to an official inspection. The weight proves to be twelve grams heavier than a kilogram. Madhav first dismisses the difference as trivial, but eventually accepts that every customer deserves a correct measure. He replaces the old weight with a certified black one that is exactly a kilogram. The yellow weight remains in the shop as a keepsake. The story finds the true measure of honesty not in polish, age or prestige, but in the accuracy of the weight used in every transaction.

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Story 359 · Not a Leader Who Forgets Names, but a Teacher

Shivnarayan Jha, an eighty-five-year-old retired schoolteacher, often forgets the names of his former pupils. Yet their temperaments, classroom incidents and the scenes of their schooldays remain remarkably vivid to him. A young teacher, Neelam, seeks his help while reconstructing an old school register damaged by water. His memories provide valuable clues, but they also reveal the danger of recording guesses as established facts. Neelam therefore decides that no name will enter the final register until it has been corroborated by at least two independent records. Eighteen of twenty-two cases are confirmed; four are left uncertain. The teacher's recollections are preserved separately, explicitly marked as clues rather than proof. The story holds affectionate personal memory apart from the evidence required to establish an historical fact.

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Story 360 · The Fundraising Expert

Gangaram Sahu is called a miser because he never gives money out of his own pocket, yet he possesses an extraordinary gift for persuading others to contribute. When the village library's roof begins to leak, he is put in charge of raising what is needed for repairs. From one person he obtains cash, from another bricks, bamboo or labour; someone else provides a vehicle. He bargains over the price of materials and keeps the accounts open for everyone to inspect. The repairs are completed and the books made safe. In the final account Gangaram's personal cash contribution is shown as zero. Everyone nevertheless understands that without his time, effort and organizing ability the work would not have been possible. The villagers promptly entrust him with raising contributions for another community project.

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Story 361 · The Free Photograph

At a family gathering organised by the Belahi panchayat, the announcement of free family portraits sends the narrator, his wife Nirmala and their children Gauri and Naval to the venue dressed in their finest clothes. Having received the first number for a photograph, he is asked by the organisers to help put the name slips in order. Rain, muddled numbers and misplaced envelopes soon keep the entire family occupied all day, helping others have their pictures taken and distributing the prints. In the end they realise that they have forgotten to have their own formal family portrait taken. Yet the photographer's camera contains an unposed picture of all four of them working together. Nirmala has that photograph framed and displayed at home. They had gone to show off their clothes; what the picture finally preserves is their shared labour and participation.

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Story 362 · Not by the Clock, but by Agreement

In the village of Belahi, the shop, the school, the panchayat and the watches in people's pockets all tell different times. Everyone believes that his own clock is right, and work undertaken together is repeatedly delayed. The time for transplanting paddy seedlings in the field of Phulo Devi, a widow, is running out, but people arrive and prepare to leave according to their separate reckonings. Jyoti suggests that instead of assigning hours, they divide the rows of the field and agree upon definite responsibilities. Rows are allotted according to the strength and availability of the young, the elderly and the other workers. By helping one another, they finish the transplanting. A few days later the growing green paddy has erased every distinction between one person's rows and another's. The village clocks still disagree; the people have learned that common work depends upon clear agreement and responsibility.

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Story 363 · Where Am I to Blame?

Bhola Jha is entrusted with distributing saplings in the village. Jyoti Devi, an agricultural extension worker, advises him to record each recipient's full name, house number and the kind of soil suitable for the plant. Bhola, trusting his memory, makes brief signs and abbreviations instead. In the rain his marks become illegible, and mango, guava, neem and other saplings reach the wrong households or are planted in unsuitable places. The villagers identify the plants, inspect their condition and replant them wherever necessary. Bhola avoids admitting responsibility, attempting to present the mistaken distribution as a fortunate outcome. The following year the committee introduces clear labels, house numbers and coloured threads. Bhola calls these improvements, which arose from his own mistake, the fruit of 'experience'. Once again, however, he escapes the question of who was to blame.

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Story 364 · The Devout Thief

Devkinandan Jha, widely regarded as devout, takes his neighbours' bamboo poles, water vessels, hammer and other belongings for work at the temple without first asking permission. He calls this not theft but 'temporary redistribution'. One day a missing hammer threatens to bring essential repairs at Phoolmati Kaki's house to a halt. An inquiry by the temple committee finds twenty-seven objects whose owners or permission to borrow them cannot be clearly established. An incident involving Devkinandan's own beloved umbrella makes him understand what it means to claim a right over another person's property. The committee requires prior consent from the owner, an agreed return date and a written account of any compensation for damage. Devkinandan returns the old borrowed objects and begins asking permission before taking anything for new work. At last he acknowledges that even when a religious purpose is involved, a loan remains a loan; taking something without consent is another matter altogether.

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Story 365 · The Committee for Good Conduct

The Committee for Good Conduct in Barhi Tola sets up blue complaint slips and a numbered register to settle public disputes. At first the arrangement seems admirable. Yet complaints concerning committee members or their close relatives never enter the main register; they are kept separately in grey envelopes. At the annual open meeting, Niranjan's reckoning shows that decisions have been announced on only fifty-two of eighty-four complaints. When Phoolmati Kaki produces proof of her own missing slip, the thirty-two suppressed complaints are found. The members admit that maintaining a separate rule for one's own people is not good conduct. Every slip is entered in the main register and given an impartial hearing. The next time, a complaint that the secretary's goat has eaten flowers on public land is recorded as well. The secretary himself writes down the decision requiring compensation and corrective action.

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Story 366 · Sacred Parking

At the festival of Pipra Shiva Temple, the committee secretary, Raghunandan Jha, marks out parking spaces with lime and calls them 'Sacred Parking'. He lectures worshippers on restraint and respect for other people's rights. Mahendra Sah, a donor, other distinguished visitors and even those who devised the rules nevertheless cross the painted lines for their own convenience, blocking the footpath used by elderly people and handcart vendors. When the vehicles must leave after the sermon, the disorder becomes impossible to ignore. Questions from Niranjan and Binda Kaki compel the committee to apply the same rules to everyone. The prestige of making a donation confers no special right to use the road. Raghunandan removes the word 'sacred' and puts up a plain notice: 'Parking Area. Keep the Pedestrian Path Clear.' The next day he leaves his own motorcycle at the very back, within its allotted space.

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Story 367 · A Photograph of Charity

Mahendra Sah installs a hand pump in Belahi's southern hamlet in memory of his father. On the day of its inauguration, his principal concerns are the name plaque, his spotless kurta and an attractive photograph, although mud has gathered around the pump and no drain has been provided for the water. While the photographs are being taken, little Chhotu slips and Buchchi Devi catches him; mud splashes Mahendra's kurta. The incident finally draws his attention to the real difficulty. A mason is engaged to construct a drain and put the water outlet right. Later the chosen photograph is one in which people draw water without anxiety, while the donor appears at the edge of the frame. Mahendra understands that the central meaning of a gift is not the display of one's name but making a public facility genuinely useful.

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Story 368 · The Great Renouncer

Jagdish Chaudhary, keeper of the key to the communal seed store, records every small service he renders in a ledger as an act of great sacrifice. When the village runs short of paddy seed, the common store proves insufficient. For five years, however, Jagdish has kept Kanakjeer seed in his private storeroom, and the thought of sharing it makes him uneasy. His wife Vimala, Manjari Devi and the other villagers do not press him; they discuss only what is needed and what alternatives remain. At last Jagdish freely distributes eighteen kilograms and three hundred and fifty grams of seed among nine families. After the harvest, the families return seed to the communal store according to their means. For the first time Jagdish writes no speech praising his 'sacrifice'. He merely records the quantity of seed. The worth of service lies in its actual result, not in extravagant declarations about oneself.

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Story 369 · The Truthful Merchant

Banshidhar Sah, a cloth merchant in Madhubani, displays a notice promising to describe every article exactly as it is. He does not tell his customers outright lies. Yet he explains the difference between a hand-painted design, hand-applied colour on printed outlines and an entirely machine-printed pattern only when a customer happens to ask the precise question. Maithreyi, the daughter of a customer named Pramod Jha, challenges this half-truth: how can buyers ask about something they do not even know exists? Banshidhar accepts the fault in his practice, separates his goods into three clearly labelled classes and records the full particulars. To his notice he adds a promise that information necessary for a purchase will be given without waiting to be asked. He explains the difference between all three kinds of cloth to his next customer and leaves the choice freely to her. Truth, the story shows, means more than avoiding lies: it requires avoiding a silence that misleads.

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Story 370 · The Receipt for Merit

Ramanand Chaudhary, a retired man, keeps an account of the religious merit earned by his good deeds. From helping an elderly person cross the road to making donations, he records points, expenses and witnesses for each action. But a raised platform he has built, together with his plan for a new shop, blocks an old public drain and causes water to collect. A mason and an elderly resident, Harinarayan Paswan, show him clear evidence; still Ramanand initially postpones the decision to dismantle his construction. At last he accepts responsibility for returning the advance paid by his tenant Gopal, removes the new structure and opens the drain again. The water begins to flow freely. He awards himself no points for this correction, writing only 'My Liability' in his account. The blank space on an unfinished receipt reminds him that correcting one's own wrong is not a charitable act to be displayed, but an ordinary, direct responsibility.

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Story 371 · A Respectable Family

Vinaykant Jha, a retired headmaster, has displayed seven rules of civilised behaviour in a frame for his household. The family is gathering to celebrate his fortieth wedding anniversary. Yet although Chandrakala Mandal has performed domestic work for them for years, everyone calls her 'Kaki' and not one of them knows her full name. A question from Vinaykant's granddaughter Ira makes the family recognise its neglect. Chandrakala knows the name of every member of the family, and asks for leave to attend a school function for her grandson Nishant. On the day of the gathering, the family serves the guests and manages the arrangements itself, setting aside a chair in Chandrakala's name. Later she receives a card bearing her own name. For the first time, Vinaykant writes that name in full in the old wage register. Rules of civility acquire meaning only when respect enters everyday conduct.

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Story 372 · The Preaching Passenger

Throughout a bus journey, Shashibhushan Pathak delivers ceaseless lectures to his fellow passengers about discipline, queues, low voices and the proper care of tickets. An elderly woman, Ramlochan and the younger travellers all have to listen to his rules. Suddenly Shashibhushan discovers that his own ticket is missing, just as an inspector boards to check fares. The preacher grows increasingly anxious, while the very people he has been correcting help him look for the ticket. At last the slip is found caught in the string around Ramlochan's bundle. It probably fell from Shashibhushan's pocket when he was helping with the elderly woman's luggage. He begins to see the absurdity of his uncompromising manner. On subsequent journeys he offers easy, practical assistance instead of lectures whenever someone is in difficulty. The value of rules emerges not from stern preaching but from humble, helpful conduct.

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Story 373 · Pure Food

Shashidhar Jha takes pride in the household rule 'Pure Food, Peaceful Mind'. He notes the sources of his lentils, oil, milk and vegetables in meticulous detail. Gradually, however, his rules about the purity of provisions turn into suspicion and harshness towards people. At a meal in his home, he praises his own arrangements rather than the labour of his wife Malati and their helper Neelima. By withholding money due to the shopkeeper Kishore Sah, he also makes it difficult for Kishore to obtain medicine for his ailing mother. Neelima, meanwhile, ensures that the payment is made on time. Shashidhar admits his obstinacy and apologises to Kishore. For the first time, instead of recording the quality of the food in his ledger, he notes a failure in his own behaviour. He comes to understand that purity of food is not enough: dealing rightly with other human beings is equally necessary.

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Story 374 · The Ceremony of Forgiveness

At the Sakri milk cooperative, two sample numbers are transposed. Saroja Devi is wrongly suspected of diluting her milk with water, and the cooperative stops accepting her supply. A later investigation establishes that the mistake was the committee's. Its secretary, Gaurishankar Mishra, then arranges a public ceremony in the name of asking forgiveness. The entire incident is rehearsed before the crowd, and the innocent Saroja is told to pose for photographs wearing a garland and holding a certificate. To her, the display feels like a repetition of the original humiliation. She raises instead, at the office, the actual financial loss, the payment withheld and the need to repair the procedure. She leaves the certificate of honour behind rather than taking it home. At the collection centre the following morning, no festive banner bears her name; the ordinary rate for milk hangs in its usual place. Forgiveness is made real by putting matters right, not by staging a ceremony.

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Story 375 · The Kind Employer

Vachaspati Jha proudly declares that Sumitra, who has worked in his house for fifteen years, is practically a member of the family. He offers examples of help during illness and gifts on special occasions. Yet when the plans for his new house are drawn, no dignified space is set aside for Sumitra to rest or stay. After river erosion displaces her, Sumitra rents a separate room with her daughter and begins returning to it when her agreed working hours end. The household is uncomfortable with this independence. On the night of the housewarming, Vachaspati urges her to remain, saying that she should consider it her 'own home'. But there is nowhere for her to sleep. She shows him the key to her rented room and leaves. On the plan of the new house, a trace of the erased word 'room' exposes the distance between the employer's profession of kindness and his actual treatment of her.

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Story 376 · The Poster of Truth

At the Kamalpur block office, Shashinath Chaudhary, coordinator of an anti-corruption week, has a poster put up proclaiming, 'Public Money, Public Accounts'. Yet Manjula Karn, an accounts assistant, finds that an attempt has been made to pay for the campaign's printing from another budget head without authorisation, and that the cost of a single order has been split between two invoices. Shashinath argues that the purpose was in the public interest and that no one gained personally. Kiran, the investigating officer, makes it clear that a worthy objective cannot legitimise an irregular procedure. Shashinath finally signs a proposal to correct the earlier entry and undertakes to settle the craftsman.s outstanding payment through the prescribed process. A statement of the actual expenditure is displayed beside the public poster. The true test of preaching honesty lies in making the accounts of one's own actions public.

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Story 377 · The Good Man's Testimony

After a flood, retired headmaster Bhaveshwar Mishra serves as a trusted witness when villagers' losses are assessed. He did not actually see Ramsevak's wall fall, but, wanting the man to receive assistance, he signs a declaration as though he had witnessed it. Questioned by a district official, he recognises the falsehood of his statement and admits that he never saw the wall collapse. Ramsevak is then allowed a fresh on-site inspection, and his name remains on the assistance list on the strength of the damage actually verified. Another person in need, Naseem, also has his claim properly examined. Bhaveshwar comes to realise that false testimony, however compassionately intended, weakens justice. From then on he signs only for matters of which he has direct knowledge.

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Story 378 · The Coin in the Donation Box

A common donation box is placed in Pipra village to raise money for repairing the old well. The rule is that it will be opened before everyone with two keys, and that the contributions will be recorded as one collective sum. Grain merchant Ratinath Chaudhary seeks prestige for having given the very first donation, a one-rupee coin, and puts a slip bearing his name into the box. When the money is counted in public, however, the slips are not found in any reliable order. No one can establish which gift came first. Kiran, the treasurer, keeps a transparent account of the money but does not draw up a public ranking of donors. The well's platform and pulley are repaired, with the remainder reserved for future maintenance. Ratinath's named slip survives in the records, while beside the well the gifts of everyone form a single common account.

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Story 379 · The Courteous Driver

Nagendra Jha, who drives a passenger vehicle, considers himself a polite man because he adds the respectful word 'ji' to the end of his harsh remarks. On the road he hurls insulting comparisons at cyclists, older people and handcart vendors, yet insists that his language is respectful. His assistant Bijay and Sarojini, who conducts a meeting about road behaviour, examine the words he uses and ask which of them actually gives another road user useful guidance. Nagendra begins to see that adding a term of respect cannot cancel an insult, and that shouting gives no clear information for safer travel. On his next journeys he begins using brief, precise directions: 'Keep left; a vehicle is coming from behind.' Passengers move aside in time and complaints diminish. The words 'Courteous Service' painted on his vehicle finally begin to correspond to his conduct.

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Story 380 · The Character Certificate

To apply for a temporary post at a grain store, Madhav Mandal needs character certificates from two respected people. Bhuvaneshwar Master, a retired headmaster, is initially ready to sign without knowing enough about him. Another prominent man, Ramakant Sah, asks Madhav to put an earlier date into the committee's receipt register. Madhav refuses to alter the date improperly, so Ramakant strikes out his signature. Despite the difficulty, Madhav obtains a clear, limited statement from someone who actually knows him and submits valid documents with his application. The form bearing the cancelled signature is of no use for the appointment, but Madhav keeps it separately. That rejected paper reveals his real character more plainly than any endorsement: even under pressure, he has the courage not to falsify a record.

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Story 381 · The Fasting Feast

At a communal observance of Nirjala Ekadashi, Ramkripal Mishra devotes immense attention to arranging nine kinds of food permitted during a fast, the seating of donors and the order in which refreshments will be served. But the elderly Sita Devi must take medicine at a fixed time, and some of the women helping with the arrangements remain without food far too long. While everyone is preoccupied with the ceremonial photograph, the conch and the seating plan, Sita Devi leaves rather than wait any longer; Champa Kaki, too, eats only very late. The next day Ramkripal visits Sita Devi and recognises his failure. In the arrangements for future observances, he decides to record people's medication times, the distances they must travel home and when volunteers need to eat, before assigning seat colours or counting dishes. The significance of a fast lies not in prolonging hunger but in understanding the needs of the people who undertake it.

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Story 382 · The Prize for Humility

No sooner has the town library announced a 'Prize for Humility' than distinguished citizens begin arranging to have others nominate them. All declare that they have no desire for an award, while submitting elaborate evidence of their secret service, their refusal to accept credit and photographs showing them seated modestly at the back. As the committee tries to assign marks, it sees that competition over humility is itself changing people's behaviour. Mridula, the secretary, asks how one can gather public proof of a quality that consists in not seeking public recognition. The committee decides to give no prize that year and to spend the money instead on repairing the leaking roof over the library veranda. When the work is completed, no plaque bears any individual's name. In the rain the children's books stay dry, while the thick file of evidence offered in support of humility lies quietly in a cupboard.

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Story 383 · The Last Row

At the anniversary of the town reading room, Ramanand Jha, a long-standing donor, is displeased to find no 'distinguished guest' designation on his invitation. He wants a seat near the stage and a place in the group photograph. Ramjatan, arranging the chairs, asks why he is so insistent on moving forward when he can see the stage and hear every word from where he sits. In the conversation that follows, Ramanand begins to appreciate the last row and chooses to sit there. There is too little time during the programme for a separate photograph of the supporting members. Later, when Ramanand does not find his face in the commemorative booklet, he feels a moment of resentment, but remembers his father in connection with the place where he sat. He realises that the value of taking part in a gathering cannot be measured solely by one's proximity to the stage or visibility in a photograph.

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Story 384 · The River on Paper

Thirty-seven families live in Garhiya Tola, a settlement formed after the Kamala River changed its course, but on the government's revenue map the land is marked 'zero habitation'. Champa Sahni's daughter Poonam cannot obtain proof of address for a scholarship, while the construction department prepares to store materials on what it believes to be vacant land. Champa and Poonam compile the families' names, old government slips, and details of the well, hand pump, school courtyard and route by which boats approach during floods. They make no unverified claim of ownership; they ask only that the actual settlement be acknowledged. A joint inspection records all thirty-seven houses, the place selected for construction materials is changed, and a survey note is added to the map. The story's achievement is that human lives are finally entered into a space that was blank on paper.

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Story 385 · The Number on the Brick

At a brick kiln, Ramdev Mandal is assigned a tin number, '31', in place of his name. His wages, advances and the count of bricks he makes are all handled under that number. An old entry in the register threatens to deduct an unjustified eighteen hundred bricks from his account. A partly preserved receipt reveals that the entry belonged to another worker who had held number 31 before Ramdev. The owner corrects the account, but no one can properly remember even the former worker's name. An inquiry finally establishes that he was Surjan Yadav and that wages are still owed to him. New rules require every number to be accompanied by the worker's name, village and date of starting work. Numbers may suffice for rows of bricks; an account of human labour must also preserve the labourer's name.

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Story 386 · The Path Through the Forest

A narrow track through the sal forest at Belsar is used by people from three hamlets going to the milk collection centre, school and market. Forest guard Bateshwar Jha closes it for new planting, because the route does not appear as a public path on the official map. Saroja Devi has the regular movements of travellers counted, revealing that hundreds of people depend on it in a single day. After an inspection, a field assistant from the forest department decides that saplings will be planted on both sides and that the old route for walkers and cyclists will remain open. Posts are placed at either entrance to keep motor vehicles out of the forest. The map is updated to show the path as it actually exists. Protecting woodland and meeting local people's needs are not necessarily opposing aims; with proper arrangements they can be pursued together.

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Story 387 · The Signature for Wages

Dhanvanti Paswan, working to remove silt from Belahi pond, cannot read, but remembers every one of the twelve days she has worked. Beside her name in the payment register only ten and a half measured workdays have been entered. The labour of carrying sacks and clearing the outlet in the rain has never been included under the heading 'Other Work'. Dhanvanti notices the discrepancy and has the accounts of the other women labourers checked too. The omitted days are added after an inquiry. She learns to write her name from her daughter Sunita, but comes to understand that reading every column of the account before signing is more important still. Later she encourages Rampari and the other workers to check their days, measurements, rates and sums due. Here a signature means more than writing one's name: it represents a vigilant claim to the rightful value of one's labour.

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Story 388 · The Quarry Zone

Near Kushaha Tola the safety boundary of a stone quarry repeatedly advances towards the field of Sugiya Devi. Red bamboo poles, yellow marks, blue flags and lines of lime interrupt her cultivation, while officials begin recording the affected area as 'fallow'. Sugiya preserves the number of the old culvert, number four, along with the order restricting access and her own measurement notice. An official land survey establishes that the licensed boundary lies elsewhere and that temporary safety markings cannot change the permanent boundary of a holding. The office records the actual reasons her cultivation was obstructed, removes the temporary markings and re-establishes the fixed boundary posts. Sugiya sows peas again. The story insists on an evidenced distinction between the legitimate need for safety and the farmer's rights.

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Story 389 · Ration Day

On the seventh day of the month, seventy-two-year-old Sonmati Devi of Sonbarsa arrives to collect her ration, only to find that her name has disappeared from the new government list with the entry 'transferred'. She has lived in the same house for years and has kept old ration slips proving that she regularly received grain. The office sends her from place to place in search of papers and verification. Sonmati brings together proof of residence, the village worker's on-site inspection and the previous month's distribution register, and asks the authorities how a woman recorded as collecting grain until last month can suddenly be treated as absent. At last a correction order enables her to receive the current month's ration, and the next list records her status as 'present'. She keeps every piece of evidence: a person whose existence is reduced to a name on paper may have to prove that existence again and again.

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Story 390 · The Distance to School

After Class Eight, Kanchan of Kamalpur wants to attend Belahi High School, more than ten kilometres from her home. To qualify for a government bicycle grant, she must first attend school for twenty days; without a bicycle, however, reaching school for those first twenty days is itself difficult. Headmistress Madhavi Jha has an old blue bicycle repaired and arranges to lend it temporarily as an 'admission bicycle'. Kanchan travels safely with Rekha and Sarita and fulfils the attendance requirement. When her new bicycle arrives under the grant, she returns the old one with a proper entry in the records. It then passes to another new pupil, Poonam. The number of kilometres has not decreased, but a shared resource has removed the obstacle posed by the first twenty days.

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Story 391 · The Song of the Stone-Breakers

Beside the Sonbarsa road, twelve women, among them Jamuna Devi, break stones. As they work, they sing a song whose lines change from day to day with the events of their labour. Anupama, a teacher collecting songs for a cultural booklet, removes the references to water, passing vehicles, a broken hammer and the counting of baskets, giving the song a more polished literary form. Later, when the wage register records eighteen days instead of twenty-two, Jamuna recalls the missing days through the verses the women had sung. Details preserved in Anupama's original notebook—the Tuesday market, a red gamchha, a yellow vehicle—can be checked against other records, and the days are verified. Anupama henceforth preserves the changing verses of work rather than only the version she has tidied for publication. The song is not merely entertainment: it is also a living memory of days of labour.

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Story 392 · The Right to the Forest

A new, straight boundary drawn by the Forest Department cuts through the bamboo grove of Dhanmaya Devi at Simarbanni. Her granddaughter Kusum compares an old file, fixed boundary posts and the actual course of the Kachhua stream. The certified earlier description directs that the boundary should follow the seasonal watercourse, but a bend in that stream has disappeared from the new map. A joint departmental inspection confirms the error, and the boundary is redrawn along the stream. Most of Dhanmaya's bamboo grove now lies outside the forest boundary; seven bamboo plants on the far bank, however, remain on forest land. The family accepts this finding as well. Their struggle for their rights has been guided by evidence; verification means not only establishing what is yours, but also acknowledging the limits of your claim.

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Story 393 · Compensation for the Bridge

The news that a bridge will be built over the Kamala fills the people of Basahi with delight. Yet the approach road will take in eleven houses, including Jhumri Devi's. With official permission, she removes the timber and other materials from her house that can be used again. During the later assessment of compensation, an attempt is made to reduce the amount on the ground that the house was 'already partly demolished'. Jhumri lays out the dates of the first inspection, the permission to remove materials and the subsequent valuation in their proper sequence. She makes it clear that she does not oppose the bridge: she demands only the fair value of her home. A joint review corrects the assessment. The compensation enables her to build another house, to whose door she fixes the old door-latch. The bridge makes journeys easier when it opens, while the memory of her former home and the documents securing just compensation remain with her.

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Story 394 · The Labourer in the Photograph

While working on a drainage channel at Shivpur, Budhan Mandal is transferred one day from the third section to the second. Because the transfer is not entered in the attendance and payment records, his wages are called into question. In a photograph included in the progress report, Budhan can be seen using a hand tamper in the second section. The photograph bears a clear date, and the issue register for tool number twelve confirms his work there that day. Taken together, these records establish his claim and his wages are corrected. A rule is then introduced requiring photographs to be accompanied by the section, date, relevant numbers and a reference to the attendance register, without unnecessarily making a worker’s personal details public. More important than printing a labourer’s name under a picture is keeping an evidentiary trail by which the work can be traced to that worker.

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Story 395 · The Red Card

Phulmati Devi lives with her husband Harikishun and their three children in a separate household behind the ancestral courtyard at Barail. They have their own hearth, grain and income. Yet because their dwelling shares the house number ‘47’ with the rest of the premises, the authorities refuse to issue them a separate red card for food assistance. Not one member of Phulmati’s family is listed on the card belonging to her uncle Bhuvaneshwar’s household, but the office continues to treat both households as one. The distribution register and a site inspection establish that two independent families live in the same compound. The administration makes provision for the sub-number ‘47-A’ under the common house number. All five members of Phulmati’s household are entered separately and receive their due grain. ‘The house number was one,’ she says, ‘but there had always been two households.’

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Story 396 · The Sand Landing

Permission is granted to extract sand for three months from the Sonbarsa landing on the Kamala. Once heavy vehicles and excavating machines begin work, the water level in nearby wells starts to fall and fine sand appears in some of them. Haripriya, who sells tea, records the daily change in her well by the knots tied in its rope. Her daughter Manju adds an eighth knot. The villagers' records prompt a government inspection. Although the excavation pit is within the licensed strip, the access road for the vehicles has been cut into a prohibited stretch of the river's former channel. The road and its boundary are corrected, and the water level stabilises. When the permit expires, Haripriya leaves the eighth knot in place. It reminds her to remain attentive to the river's changing condition.

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Story 397 · The Temporary Settlement

After a flood on the Kamala, eighteen displaced families were housed in a ‘temporary relief settlement’ at Dharharwa. Over thirty years it grew into a hamlet of forty-six households. Yet the original temporary designation remains in the administrative record, preventing the installation of a safe, permanent water pipeline. Malati Devi and other residents gather evidence: the original relief order, which provided for a review after three years, the present number of houses, the distance from the river and the condition of the water supply. Following a joint survey and inspection, the officials accept that an old notation which was never reviewed cannot justify withholding basic water facilities. Without prejudging the separate question of land ownership, they install a safe pipeline with three public taps. The word ‘temporary’ thus becomes a matter for scrutiny, not an excuse for permanent neglect.

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Story 398 · The School in the Forest

Naresh Babu, a teacher at the primary school in Beljhariya amid the sal forest, fails to attend regularly. Sugni Kaki, who keeps the key, opens the classroom, and Phulkumari, a pupil in Class Five, begins teaching the younger children from the books available. Raghu and Chanda help her, but difficult questions go unanswered; the children put these questions on slips of paper collected in a red bag. During an inspection, education coordinator Sudhanshu Jha observes that an open classroom and actual teaching are two different things. Arrangements are made for a teacher from another school to visit on fixed days and for a substitute to be designated in advance when the regular teacher is absent. The children's register of questions is preserved. Under the new arrangement, Phulkumari leaves the teacher's chair and returns to her own place among the pupils.

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Story 399 · The Power of a Signature

The twelve members of the Anjor Women's Savings Group in Sonbarsa have learned to write their names. Chandrakala Devi urges them to read the statement printed above a signature, too. After a communal platform for drying paddy is built, the contractor's representatives seek their signatures on a certificate declaring it free of defects. Yet the platform is cracked, drainage is inadequate, and the period allowed for repairs has not expired. The women read the file and insist that the actual condition be recorded. Only after inspection and repairs do they certify what they have themselves observed, and each line is read aloud before it is signed. The group resolves that no member will sign a blank sheet or a page detached from its context. Literacy becomes a right only when one also understands the obligations carried by the written words.

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Story 400 · Half a Day’s Wages

At the Belwara cooperative paddy store, Bachchan Mandal and five other labourers undertake a full day’s assignment to unload 480 sacks. Fearing rain, they work together and complete the assigned task before noon. Because the office closes, a second attendance slip is never issued. At payment time, their wages are cut in half on the ground that there are not two slips. Bachchan asks who, if they have done only half a day’s work, unloaded the remaining sacks. A comparison of the work order, the goods-received register and the attendance record establishes that the entire assignment was completed. The official has a correction added without erasing the original entry, and all six workers receive their full wages. A written rule is adopted for the future: completion of the assigned work will count as a full day’s work.

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Story 401 · Four Handfuls of Seed

Gopal and Sunaina set aside four handfuls of seed from every sack of paddy grown on the field they cultivate as sharecroppers. When the landowner's son, Naresh, considers farming it himself, a dispute arises over ownership of the seed and over Sunaina's labour in sorting and drying it. Together they frame a written rule preserving the seed for whoever cultivates the field next and governing its use. The sacks tied with red and green thread become signs of continuity in the cultivation of the land and recognition of the work that has gone into it.

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Story 402 · The Plough's Journey

Jagesar and Nandu hire out a shared team of oxen and a plough at a single rate for half a day. Mohan, whose field is far away, receives less actual ploughing than a farmer nearby because of the journey and the animals' need for rest. The brothers measure several turns of the journey, the ploughing and the resting time. After consulting the farmers, they begin accounting separately for the time spent ploughing and the journey, and make provision for the animals' care. An old rule is made fairer in the light of changed circumstances.

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Story 403 · Half a Bamboo Pole

Binti Devi needs a piece of bamboo of a particular length for her thatched roof, not an entire pole. Ramcharit, who sells bamboo, comes to see that half the length does not necessarily mean half the price, since the thicker and thinner portions are useful for different purposes. Taking another customer's requirements into account, he calculates the cutting cost, the remaining pieces and their strength. He finally adopts a new practice: measure the customers' needs first and cut the bamboo only when the pieces can be matched sensibly.

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Story 404 · The First Milk in the Cowshed

Sudama's cow is kept and cared for in Gauri Devi's cowshed. When a calf is born, their verbal agreement to divide the milk equally becomes confused by questions about the first milk, the calf's share and the cost of care. Gauri insists that the calf's needs come first and asks for a proper account of fodder, treatment, labour and the milk remaining. The two households draw up a written arrangement clearly assigning a place to the calf's nourishment and to responsibility for its care.

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Story 405 · A Night on the Watch Platform

Farmers with four adjoining fields build a common raised platform from which to guard their crops. Budhan cannot take his turn because he has gone to his sick mother, and when animals damage the harvest, the question of blame arises. The farmers distinguish an unattended watch from a weak fence and from a genuine emergency. They establish new rules for replacement shifts in emergencies, fence repairs and the division of labour. Budhan fulfils his responsibility by helping to repair the fence.

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Story 406 · A Share of the Chaff

When a machine arrives for threshing wheat, a dispute arises over customary wages and the workers' share of the chaff. The work done by Parvati's group by hand is in danger of becoming invisible within the machine's fee. Following discussion, the payment for the machine, the labourers' work and the division of the chaff are recorded as separate items. In the next season every condition is written down before work begins, preserving recognition of established labour amid new technology.

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Story 407 · The Pond’s Two Ghats

As the pond’s water level falls in the summer, the needs of women washing clothes, livestock drinking water and young fish surviving begin to conflict. When Bhola Sahni reserves one section for the fish, Malati asks about the right to daily use. The villagers designate a washing platform, a sloping place for animals and a refuge for fish according to the water level. Under this arrangement, both the use of common water and the labour and responsibility of those who depend on it are shared.

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Story 408 · The Credit Ledger

Devaki buys household necessities and medicines on credit at Mahendra Sahu's shop, but every purchase is entered under the single name of her father-in-law's family. This leaves it unclear whose needs were met and who has paid. Devaki asks that common expenses be distinguished from those of individual household members. The shopkeeper begins to keep separate entries for the date, purpose and person concerned. Accurate accounts do not break a family apart; they help make responsibilities within it intelligible.

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Story 409 · The Mango Tree at the Field's Edge

A mango tree at the edge of Raghunath's field has been let out under a fruit-picking contract. The labourers engaged to harvest its fruit want to cross a neighbouring field of mung beans belonging to Ramsakhi Devi, threatening to damage her crop. Ramsakhi refuses them entry without her permission. The tree owner, the trader and the labourers agree on another route and a safe way of carrying the fruit away. The next contract records the need for the neighbour's permission and the responsibility for providing access before any fruit is picked.

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Story 410 · Two Days of Paddy Transplanting

Phulmati’s team of women transplanters agrees to two days’ work in Ramcharit’s field. Heavy rain interrupts the transplanting on the second day, and the landowner wishes to pay only for the area planted. Phulmati makes it clear that waiting under the owner’s instructions is also a use of the labourers’ time. Their discussion produces rules on cancellation before work begins, a rate for waiting after arrival at the field and responsibility for delayed decisions.

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Story 411 · Caring for the Calf

Phulkali Devi grazes and cares for calves belonging to several households in the village, but the register records only the owners' names and identifying marks on the animals. When a calf called Lali falls ill, questions arise over who is actually responsible for treatment, vaccination and passing on information. Afterwards the register includes each animal's health, expenses, the sequence of notifications and Phulkali's labour. Ownership remains where it was, but the work of the person tending the living creature is acknowledged.

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Story 412 · Oil-Cake from the Press

At Jugal’s oil press, the quantity of oil obtained from mustard seed is clearly measured, but the division of the oil-cake left behind is uncertain. Malati Devi wants the residue as feed for her animals, while the press owners interpret the old custom differently. Before pressing begins, they establish two clear options: pay the full fee and take all the oil-cake, or pay a reduced fee and leave an agreed share with the press. Disputes after the work are thereby reduced.

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Story 413 · The Herdsman’s Whistle

The brass whistle used for communal herding passes from house to house, each household being given an equal turn. Yet the number of animals, and therefore the burden of looking after them, is not the same in every home. Budhni Devi asks why one animal and five should require an identical share of labour. The village draws up a new roster based on the actual numbers of animals, absences and replacement turns. The whistle remains the same; the responsibilities signified by it change.

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Story 414 · The Potter’s Fire

Four potter families fire water-pots, lamps and cooking vessels in a shared kiln. When many vessels are spoiled in one firing, blame passes from one family to another. Phulkali and the other potters record the amount of wood used, the direction of the fire, the openings through which air enters and the places where vessels are arranged. In the next firing they change the positions to test the kiln and discover that too little heat reaches one side. Inquiry takes the place of accusation, opening a way to collective improvement.

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Story 415 · The Hired Pump

Bisun and Nandlal hire Raghunath Sahu’s diesel pump to irrigate their fields. The hire charge starts from the moment the engine is switched on, although a broken channel, preparation of the machine or other delays may keep water from reaching the field. In Shyama Devi’s presence, they agree to record separately the preparation time, faults in the pump, defects in the channel, actual irrigation and shutdown. Payment and responsibility no longer depend on one ambiguous reading of the clock.

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Story 416 · Two Paseris of Finger Millet

Phulmati’s family agrees to receive two paseris of finger millet as wages for work in Dhaneshwar Jha’s field. At payment time, a dispute arises over the market price and deductions for an old loan. It becomes clear that an agreed quantity of grain, its cash value and the date of a debt are not the same thing. Both sides arrange to record the basis and timing of any conversion in advance, so that a worker’s entitlement cannot change while the measure of grain remains the same.

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Story 417 · The Grass on the Embankment

Only families who have long owned land are permitted to cut grass growing on the embankment. Jamuna Devi, who owns no land but keeps two goats, is excluded from the list, although she contributes labour to maintaining the embankment. She raises the question of a share based on the animals’ needs and on common upkeep. After discussion, the distribution of grass takes account of the actual livestock, materials provided and turns spent on maintenance. Jamuna’s labour and her need both receive recognition.

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Story 418 · The Rim of the Dry Well

The old well at Belwa has dried up, and the masonry around its mouth is crumbling. Most villagers think repairs would be pointless, but Rukmini Devi draws attention to the danger of an accident and the long-term importance of a water source. The well’s rim is made safe, and a regular register is started to record measurements of the water level from one fixed point. These measurements are treated as indications, not as complete proof of groundwater conditions in the surrounding area. Even the dry well once again becomes a matter of common concern.

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Story 419 · The Last Day of Harvest

By custom, a team of paddy harvesters receives a sack of grain for clearing the threshing ground on the final day. When Nandu is absent that day for an unavoidable reason, his share is disputed. The team recognises that the sack is not merely a reward for being present on the last day; it is payment for the collective labour of cutting paddy, handling ropes and tools, and clearing the threshing ground. Nandu is assigned a replacement turn of work, and his share is preserved. The rule is made explicit from the outset of the next season.

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Story 420 · The Name of the Boundary Ridge

When the land of Jivach Mahato is divided among his three sons, the boundaries of the fields become separate, but irrigation water continues to flow over the old, shared earthen ridge. Raghunath, Devkant and Naval quarrel over who may stop or release it and when. The brothers measure the ridge's slope, the height of the board used to hold back the water and the actual course of its flow. They finally agree on a common outlet and rules for maintaining it, without changing the individual boundaries of their land.

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Story 421 · The Writing of the Dry Canal

The old water gauge of a canal closed for six years begins drawing lines again at night. Harinath Jha and his colleagues discover that water is being released after dark through a forgotten service outlet. Their inquiry brings to light an erroneous water report from twenty years earlier and the injustice done to Bansilal's family. Harinath acknowledges both the facts he had concealed and his mistake in signing the report, and writes a correction. Thereafter a regular system for releasing the water is established, and the gauge begins recording the actual flow.

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Story 422 · Three Scratches on the Padlock

When the superintendent of a girls' hostel notices scratches on the padlock of a locked storeroom, she suspects theft. Vasudha, a former student, has been trying to enter by improper means to retrieve old personal letters kept there. The search uncovers twenty-seven letters. The reason for her actions and the breach of the rules are recorded, but the privacy of the correspondence is protected, and the letters are delivered to their rightful recipients. Vasudha receives the letter written by her father.

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Story 423 · The Post Office's Thirteenth Mailbag

As a sub-post office is about to close, a thirteenth mailbag is found in addition to its usual twelve. The discovery reminds the former postmaster, Shivnath Chaudhary, of a mailbag that vanished twenty-eight years earlier, casting suspicion on the carrier Narayan Mahato. Investigation shows that the missing bag had become lodged in a hollow space inside a sealed ventilator. Shivnath admits that he had certified the count without actually checking it and had suppressed the truth. A review of the old findings begins.

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Story 424 · The Watermill Wheel Turning Backwards

Seeing the blades of an old watermill turn in reverse, Brijnandan Sah is drawn back to the memory of an earlier accident. An inquiry reveals that farmers have made a new temporary watercourse to protect their fields. In the course of the investigation, facts emerge concerning Lakhan's accident, a defective sluice gate and an altered official report. Brijnandan admits that he made an incorrect entry and records his testimony. The present course of the water is documented, although its legal status remains a separate matter for examination.

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Story 425 · Black Dots on the White Screen

Black dots appear on the white screen of a closed photographic studio. The ageing photographer Bhuvaneshwar Jha remembers an old accident during the distribution of relief supplies and his decision at the time to destroy an image of the event. Anwita safeguards the surviving photographic negatives. As they are examined, different views of the incident emerge, revealing the complexity of an earlier accusation. The visual evidence is preserved with the understanding that a whole event cannot be judged from a single photograph.

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Story 426 · The Missing Shoeprint at the Courthouse

Beside a locked rack in the district courthouse's evidence storeroom, a shoeprint appears, although there are no footprints leading inside. Madhav Mishra investigates and discovers how a shoe could be pressed into the dust with a bamboo pole passed through a gap in the roof. Ragini has devised the method in her search for the original documents relating to her father's land. Beneath the rack are found the original deed of sale and an inventory of seized property. Madhav acknowledges his earlier mistake of signing without inspection, and evidence needed for justice comes to light again.

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Story 427 · The Clock That Chimed at Half Past

The old library clock strikes at half past twelve even though its bell has been removed. Shivnarayan Mishra discovers that, when an old cupboard is moved, a wire strikes against the clock and produces the sound. Behind the cupboard, Sudha has been searching for papers concerning a complaint made long ago by her father, Naresh Paswan. The records point to an unjust decision and to Shivnarayan's earlier silence. He preserves the papers and begins a review of the decision. The mechanical chime ceases.

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Story 428 · The Rope Stretched across the Deserted Ghat

At a river landing officially closed after the construction of a bridge, a rope appears stretched across the water once more at night. Keeping watch, Harinarayan Jha discovers that Sudha and Phekan Sahni are taking patients and medicines by small boat to the settlement on the opposite bank. The actual need for medical care has been overlooked amid the official prohibition. An altered report of an old boating accident is also investigated. Harinarayan corrects his earlier false testimony, and arrangements begin for a safer alternative boat service.

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Story 429 · The Blue Glass Vial

A blue glass vial from a closed dispensary is found in different places. Investigating, Madhavi Jha discovers Mrinalini's attempt to trace evidence connected with an old incident involving contaminated medicine. The direction in which the vial moves points towards papers hidden behind a cupboard. A supply slip and a circular raise questions about the old accusation, although responsibility for a delay at the local level remains. Madhavi preserves both the vial and the records without pronouncing a final judgment on incomplete evidence.

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Story 430 · The Key Found in the Fold of a Sari

During the division of a family home, a key to an old cupboard is discovered in the fold of Kamala's sari, immediately arousing suspicion. A search into documents left unheard and Devika's efforts brings to light old papers preserved by Janaki Devi. They raise questions concerning Kamala's rights and the shared path leading to the pond. The cupboard is opened, and the legal meaning of the documents is examined. In the final partition, Kamala's share and the common pathway are clearly defined; conversation takes the place of suspicion.

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Story 431 · The Smell of Boiled Paddy

At night the smell of boiled paddy comes from a rice mill that has been closed for years. Nagendra Jha remembers an injustice committed at the mill and an incident involving Bisesar Sada. New tests lead to an examination of old accounts, altered entries and facts that had been suppressed. Rather than erase the wrongly written documents, Nagendra agrees to record corrections and keep the present accounts separately. The mill begins operating again with new machinery, while the old furnace is preserved as both a memorial and a piece of evidence.

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Story 432 · Three Blows on the School Roof

Three successive knocks are heard at night on the roof of a closed school. Investigating, the former headmaster Shivnarayan Jha is confronted by questions surrounding the school's old register and accounts suppressed in a matter involving Ramvriksha. Through the efforts of Chanda and her colleagues, preserved papers are recovered, giving grounds to reconsider an earlier accusation. Shivnarayan acknowledges in writing the mistake made during his previous inquiry. Before the school building is put to a new use, its historical records are secured.

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Story 433 · The Warmth of the Wooden Chest

In a locked room of the museum, a wooden chest grows unusually warm at night. Badri Narayan Chaudhary's investigation reveals a false bottom, Tilottama's secret attempt to protect papers from damp, and an old register of the removal of objects from the collection. The breach of rules is recorded separately, and new arrangements are made for conservation. Badri Narayan admits that he had previously suppressed a truth he had seen. The chest grows cool again, but the whole mystery of the missing statue remains unsolved.

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Story 434 · Knocking Within the Earthen Wall

A knocking sound inside an old earthen wall leads Niranjan Mishra to re-examine a dispute over the division of family land. The search turns up an old survey paper and clues to Anima's efforts. Questions arise over rights to the western plot and the shared path leading to the pond. Niranjan refrains from an immediate judgment, instead having the records, the current land register and the boundary ridge checked by a surveyor. Until a final decision is made, ploughing on the disputed path is stopped, and the documents are kept safe and accessible to both sides.

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Story 435 · The Wandering Seal

The round seal of the panchayat office is found to have shifted from its place overnight. Investigating, Harinath Jha discovers the ordinary cause: the table is tilted. Yet the search also brings to light old forms in different colours, forged certificates and discrepancies in the issue register. The additional clerical work performed by Rachana and the question of a damp seal are entered into the record. What the investigation establishes is accepted; what remains uncertain is left open.

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Story 436 · A Straight Strip Without Dew

A straight strip without dew repeatedly appears across Harinandan Yadav's mustard field. Investigating at night, he learns that members of Jagessar's family have stretched a cord to measure an old common pathway. Although the land has been sold, the question of people's right of passage remains unresolved. At Malati's urging, Harinandan examines the earlier documents and has the ground jointly measured in daylight. The marker stakes remain until a final decision, but the secretly stretched night-time cord is taken away.

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Story 437 · Behind the Broken Mirror

The mystery of papers slipping behind a broken mirror in Sharada's sewing room leads to evidence of an old financial transaction. When an envelope containing Janaki's fifteen thousand rupees went missing, Kamala was suspected. With Nishtha's help, a recovered receipt proves that Navalkishore had used the money temporarily. Sharada enters the correct facts in the register and removes the unfounded accusation against Kamala. Even after the financial account has been settled, the question of the human harm caused by the injustice remains.

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Story 438 · Red Thread on the Veranda

The repeated appearance of red thread on the veranda of an old wedding house reminds Sharada Devi of Mrinal's broken marriage. It is eventually discovered that the thread is part of a cord used to measure a room. The family plans to sell the room to pay a debt, but Mrinal has not been consulted about her share. Sharada examines the old partition papers and insists that Mrinal's opinion be sought before speaking to a buyer. The line of thread becomes a sign both of the measurement of property and of conversations suppressed within the family.

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Story 439 · Falling Letters

Metal type begins falling by itself from a box in a disused printing press. Raghunath Jha and his new colleagues investigate, discovering that vibrations from a neighbouring oil press and the box's uneven position are responsible. The strange occurrence brings back the story of four people's names omitted from an earlier publication. Raghunath, Neeraj and Kaushal decide to print those names again using the old type. The physical defect of the box is corrected, and the suppressed words return to public print.

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Story 440 · Soot on the Last Lantern

Fresh soot on an old lantern at the embankment watchpost reminds Navalkishore Mishra of a flood night eighteen years earlier. With Manoj's help, he discovers the actual time at which a warning was sent and the official entry that had been altered. Navalkishore writes in the margin of the old register an admission that, under pressure, he had accepted a changed time for the first warning. The damage already done cannot be undone, but a false record must be made to stand beside the truth. The soot remains the real mark of a vigil once kept.

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Story 441 · Seven Millimetres on a Nameplate

At a social welfare office, the nameplate of Gopal Jha, an accounts assistant, is mistakenly made seven millimetres taller than it should be. Visitors begin treating him as though he were the officer in charge of the section. The wooden plate, however, cannot alter his actual rank or authority. Following an inspection, it is replaced with one of the correct dimensions. Gopal continues helping visitors with their papers within the limits of his post. The unnecessarily large nameplate remains in the storeroom, marked 'Unusable'.

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Story 442 · The Blank Space Between Two Signatures

A payment form at the cooperative office contains an unnamed empty square between the two required signatures. Employees imagine it calls for the approval of a third official and hold up applications. Madhav, a newly appointed clerk, examines the regulations and the form's printing history, establishing that no such official is prescribed. The obstacle to Harinarayan's payment is removed, and the square disappears from the revised form. Yet the vague line marked 'For Office Use' leaves open the possibility of a fresh confusion.

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Story 443 · Chair Number Zero in the Waiting Room

A newly built hospital waiting room contains forty-eight numbered chairs and an old blue chair marked with a red zero. Patients take it to indicate a special place in the order of treatment, though the stores register has no proper number for it. After investigation, the staff record it as the forty-ninth item and put it to use near the entrance for preliminary examinations. In everyday speech it remains 'Chair Number Zero'. The chair's uncertain status gives rise to a new arrangement for patient care.

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Story 444 · Leave for an Application for Leave

In the leave department of a college, a temporary category created for applications awaiting incomplete verification becomes a way of postponing decisions. Rather than bear the responsibility of granting or refusing leave, employees leave applications pending indefinitely. Suchitra's experience exposes the defect. After a review, new rules require reasons to be given for a pending application, decisions to be taken within a fixed period and the unauthorised category to be abolished. Suchitra receives the leave she needs in time.

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Story 445 · The Inventory of an Empty Drawer

An empty drawer becomes the subject of questions during an audit of the municipal office. As Nilambar and Shambhunath trace its earlier use, they find records relating to a missing map and the drainage route from a pond. A fresh examination of Janaki Devi's case becomes possible. The recovered contents are moved to a secure place, and the drawer is declared 'Verified Empty'. The irony is that, despite the shortage of room for papers, nobody now wishes to put anything into it.

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Story 446 · The File with the Yellow Ribbon

In the treasury, a yellow ribbon has informally become a sign that a file requires urgent attention. Much depends on the judgment of the experienced Bateshwar, yet there is no written reason for the special priority. After Madhav raises the question, a prescribed slip must state the grounds of urgency, the date and the responsible officer's signature. The colour of the ribbon remains only a means of identification. Ironically, copies of the order introducing the change are themselves tied with yellow ribbon before being sent to the departments.

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Story 447 · Half a Letter in the Job Title

On Umakant Mishra's nameplate at the agricultural marketing office, the first letter of 'Avar'—meaning junior—is incomplete, making him appear to hold a higher post. The misunderstanding widens the gap between his authority and farmers' expectations. A complaint concerning payment for Kaushalya's sesame crop makes the local office's responsibility clear. Rules are established for acknowledging complaints, examining them initially and forwarding them to the district office. The missing part of the letter is restored. Umakant is not promoted, but the service becomes clearer.

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Story 448 · The Birthday of a Certificate

While transferring old certificates into digital records, Naresh notices that many documents give only the year in which they were issued. Because the computer demands a complete date, the first of July has been entered for convenience. The invented day causes an obstacle in Lakshman Mandal's claim to land. The office introduces a method for recording only as much of a date as the original document actually provides. Hundreds of imaginary 'birthdays' are removed from the records.

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Story 449 · The Authority of the Bell

At the sub-registrar's office, a bell has become an unwritten signal that a matter deserves priority. Navin realises that its ringing creates the illusion that a file has acquired some special authority. After an inquiry, the bell is restricted to calling the attendant, while urgent files must be accompanied by a written slip stating the reason. A register of the bell's use is also opened. Navin helps an elderly farmer without any signal from the bell.

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Story 450 · The Fifth Space for Four Seals

On an assistance form, a fifth empty square has been printed after the four required seals. Employees and applicants begin searching for a nonexistent office that might fill it. Bholanath checks the regulations and finds that only four approvals are required. On existing forms, the extra space is crossed out and marked 'Not Applicable'; it is removed from the next printing. The time people have lost in the search for an imaginary fifth seal becomes the real consequence of an error on paper.

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Story 451 · Service Window Number Nine

The railway parcel office has eight service windows, yet the receipt issued for a complaint directs the applicant to a ninth. Dhanmanti, who has come to collect a part for her loom, wanders about searching for a window that does not exist. The error holds up both the verification of her papers and the release of the parcel. Harinarayan and his colleagues set up a separate assistance desk and begin a register of unresolved cases. But no one can establish how many people have already turned away without lodging their complaints. Dhanmanti's experience lays bare a failure in the very arrangements intended to provide a service.

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Story 452 · The Table Beside the Gate

At a land-survey camp, a table beside the entrance is repeatedly moved from one side of the gate to the other. Papers handed to Jagessar, the watchman, are not recognised as having been formally received. Phulpatiya must consequently make journey after journey to the camp, each visit costing her a day's wages. The staff finally lay down clear rules for where applications are to be accepted, how receipts are to be issued, and which date counts as the date of submission. Phulpatiya's request is entered in the register, and she receives notice of the survey; the wages she has lost, however, are never restored. Before the boundary of her land can be measured, the boundary of entry into an office has itself become a dispute.

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Story 453 · The Promotion of the Red Pencil

By mistake, Dinesh in the audit branch is supplied with a red pencil from the stores. A red circle is commonly taken to be a special mark made by a senior officer; when Dinesh draws one without any explanatory note, it begins to carry the force of an instruction. Confusion follows over the accounts of a payment due to Saraswati. Dinesh accepts responsibility for the circle he has drawn and writes the question in full in the margin of the paper. Thereafter he abandons reliance on the colour alone, recording every objection with its reason, date and his own name.

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Story 454 · The Pink Margin Lost in the Photocopy

The final date of Raghav Chaudhary's temporary charge at the handicrafts office is written in the pink margin of an order. In a black-and-white photocopy, that crucial information disappears. No one can tell with certainty when Raghav's authority came to an end, and a payment owed to Sunita Devi is held back. Meera investigates; Raghav, unwilling to act under an uncertain authority, refrains from granting the final approval. A new procedure requires the dates of an officer's charge to be written in the main body of an order, so that its meaning survives even when its colour does not.

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Story 455 · The Empty Box for a Date

The flood does not destroy Janaki Devi's home on a single day. Over three successive days, one part after another gives way. The relief form, however, allows only one 'exact date' for the loss. Examining Renu's daily record, Kumud Jha finds separate dates for the destruction of the enclosure, the hearth and the room. For the purposes of the procedure, 12 August is adopted. In time, even Janaki Devi begins to recount what happened to her as though everything had occurred on that one day. The story reveals the pain of a private memory gradually reshaped for the convenience of an official date.

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Story 456 · Proof of Being Five Minutes Late

An accusation arises that a sealed pouch of archive keys was handed over five minutes late. When Nandakishore Jha and Harinarayan Paswan investigate, they discover that the clocks used to record the event were not keeping the same time. The discrepancy affects the processing of compensation due to Kanaklata Devi. A new method is introduced for synchronising time, recording the actual handover and obtaining signatures. The absurdity remains that a difference of four seconds is entered as 'zero minutes'; nevertheless, the transfer of keys now has a verifiable record.

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Story 457 · The Colour of the File Cloth

In the social assistance office, the colour of a file's cloth cover has come to serve as the principal means of identifying its department. When the supply of purple cloth runs out, a widow's assistance file is tied in green and sent to the wrong branch. Maithili Chaudhary traces the series of mistakes that follows. Under the revised system, the branch's name must appear on a durable label, and the subject written on the first page must actually be read. The colour of a piece of cloth is no longer permitted to stand in place of what a file contains.

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Story 458 · One Office, Two Names

Although the minor irrigation and water-conservation branches have been merged, the office continues using two seals, two letterheads and an old banking identity. Prabhakar Jha discovers that this duplication has stalled work on the irrigation sluice at Kunwarpur. The bank, too, questions the office's legal identity. Eventually a single new name, bank account and seal are formally recognised. The old seal is preserved in the storeroom as part of the office's history, but it is no longer impressed upon a citizen's correspondence.

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Story 459 · The Second Step of the Staircase

When a staircase in the district records building breaks, visitors find it difficult to reach the offices upstairs. Shambhunath, a senior clerk, places a temporary public-assistance table beside the second step. People begin receiving help there with questions about land registers and certified copies. Even after the staircase is repaired, the table remains because it has proved useful to the public. Its proper location is entered in the building inventory, though people continue to know it simply as 'the second step'.

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Story 460 · The Officer in the Last Row

In the district development office's staffing register, a salary allocation stands against an empty line at the very end. Raghav Chaudhary investigates and establishes that it is an error carried over from an old table, not an authorised post. Meanwhile the uncertain position of Rukmini, who has been doing real work on a temporary basis, comes under consideration. Approval is obtained for a defined term of employment, specified duties, a designation and her wages. The imaginary vacancy is removed, while the actual worker's name is clearly entered in a separate register.

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Story 461 · Present in Three Places

Sushama, the daughter of Jagdish Paswan, is denied her scholarship because a consolidated register appears to show her father present in three places at the same time. The entries concern his mother in the village, his family in the city and his night duty at a warehouse: three different kinds of information placed together without their contexts. Premalata traces the error in the matching of the records. The permanent family address, present residence and attendance at work are separated. Sushama's assistance is resumed, and corrections begin in other cases affected by the same confusion.

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Story 462 · An Open Branch in a Closed Room

A branch of the district certification centre operates regularly in Room Twenty-seven, although the fire-safety plan marks that room as permanently closed. An inspection exposes the contradiction between the building as represented on paper and the office as it actually functions. Naresh, Revati and Chandan must address the public's ongoing work, the provision of a safe exit and the condition of the records together. A revised safety plan and new arrangements are put in place. The old plan is preserved as an example of an incomplete record.

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Story 463 · The Other Name in a Pronunciation

A voice-operated attendance machine fails to recognise the name 'Kshemanarayan Jha' and records it as 'Sem Narayan Jha'. Someone proposes changing the man's real name to suit the machine. Instead, separate fields are created for the authorised name and a guide to its pronunciation. Kshemanarayan speaks sounds the machine can understand when marking his attendance, but retains his original name in his service record. He explains to Richa Karn that a machine's ear is not the master of a human being's identity.

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Story 464 · The Form That Demands Its Answer in Advance

Prabha Devi applies for assistance for her women's sewing group, only to discover that the form demands the final application number before the application can be submitted. Navalkishore, the clerk, searches for a way of assigning an advance number. The application moves forward and the first instalment is received, but the same case acquires three different numbers. Prabha has to keep a list of them all. A later version of the form makes the earlier number compulsory as well, creating yet another circle from which an applicant cannot readily escape.

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Story 465 · The Half-day Employee

Shanti Devi cleans from six until ten in the morning, but the official system defines a 'half-day' worker as someone employed on the afternoon shift. This discrepancy obstructs her accident report and her entitlement to medical rest. A decision is made to record both the actual four hours worked and their precise times, protecting her wages. Yet her new identity card is printed once again with the wrong afternoon hours. Along its edge, the watchman writes 'morning', keeping the reality of her work in sight.

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Story 466 · Work in the Sealed Room

A room containing teachers' service records is sealed during an audit. Two years of Chandrakala Devi's service have been omitted from her pension calculation, but the original register is locked inside. Abhay and Nirmala reconstruct the record from evidence available outside the room. When the seal is removed, the original and reconstructed documents are checked against one another. Chandrakala's pension is corrected, and the copy of the records she has kept herself is preserved as a source of evidence too.

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Story 467 · The Translated Village

A digital address system gives the two distinct villages named 'Piprahi' and 'Piparhi' the same spelling in Roman letters. Relief notices and inspection letters consequently reach the wrong place. Malati and Sudhir resolve individual cases by using the local names, the administrative blocks and geographical location codes. The error in the central naming system persists for a long time. At the market, separate letterboxes for the two villages and signs pointing east and west continue to protect the routes that people actually need to follow.

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Story 468 · An Attendance Order on a Holiday

A public holiday is declared for a day already fixed for compulsory identity verification. Archana Jha receives incompatible instructions: she is to be on leave and also present at the office. A second opportunity is approved for the twenty-seven employees who missed the verification, while the eighty-three who attended the camp are granted compensatory rest. A rule is introduced requiring mandatory camps to be rescheduled when a holiday is declared. The holiday becomes real only on the day the office does not open.

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Story 469 · The Complaint Born of an Enquiry

Chandrakala Devi's application for flood rehabilitation assistance has remained pending for four months. She asks only how far it has progressed, but the computer classifies her question as a formal complaint and marks the original application as disputed. Vidyapati Mishra and his colleagues establish the distinction between an enquiry and an objection. Once the mistaken complaint is closed, her assistance begins to move forward. The system is later given a separate option for asking about the status of an application.

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Story 470 · The Black Shadow of the Scanner

Sumitra Devi's family pension is stopped when a dark line appears across the digital image of an old service certificate. Madhav Jha examines the original paper alongside other images from the same scanning batch and discovers that the line is not a mark of cancellation but the shadow of a clip in the scanner. A clear new image is made, while the earlier one is retained as part of the history of the evidence. Payment of Sumitra's arrears is released, and a rule is introduced against making decisions on the strength of a shadow alone.

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Story 471 · The Internal Letter Sent Outside

During the rains, the northern room of the district archives is in danger of getting wet. An internal order to move the records is mistakenly sent through the external post, leaving the office waiting for a letter it has itself issued. Before the order completes its formal journey on paper, the staff move the damp bundles to the safety of the southern room. Separate procedures are subsequently established for internal and external correspondence. The story sets the actual preservation of records against the circuitous journey of the order meant to preserve them.

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Story 472 · The First Day of Appointment

Vinaykant arrives at the land-records office with his appointment letter and begins work on his very first day. Yet a mismatch between his employee number and the register of assumption of charge makes the official date of his appointment a matter of dispute. The time of his arrival, the attendance sheet and evidence of the work he performed are examined separately. A new register is opened to establish the dates on which employees actually take charge. Although Vinaykant's own case remains undecided, the evidence of the next employee's first day is properly secured.

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Story 473 · Two Salaries under One Name

Two employees in the agricultural office are both named Ramnaresh Sah. Even their fathers' names and dates of birth are identical. The digital system treats them as one person, entangling their leave, salaries and promotion records. Neelima distinguishes the two by their year of appointment, village, employee number and actual attendance. The gradual correction of the old records begins. The system is given an explicit warning not to assume that two people with the same name must be one person.

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Story 474 · Absent to Prove Attendance

Poonam, an agricultural field assistant, must leave her assigned area and travel to headquarters to certify that she has been present in the field. While she is there for verification, an inspection team marks her absent from her work area. The contradiction in demanding her presence in two places at once is exposed. Separate dates for monthly verification and a defined half-day time allowance are introduced. Even so, the pressure to leave the field for verification remains, reducing the hours available for the agricultural service itself.

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Story 475 · The Original Page in the Register of Corrections

In the land records, an original page is never struck out: all alterations are entered in a separate register of corrections. Several amendments concerning the land of Sita Devi and Ramvriksha have no clearly stated effective dates, creating confusion over present ownership and an old debt. Neha and Suresh put the original record, the changes and the dates on which those changes took effect into their proper sequence. Sita Devi's present rights become clear. A new rule requires anyone preparing proof of ownership to examine not merely the last name recorded, but also the chronology of its amendments.

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Story 476 · The Envelope Without a Sender

A sealed envelope with no sender's name is found on the receipt desk of the social assistance office. The digital register refuses to accept correspondence from an unidentified person. Rama Jha and her colleagues assign it a provisional receipt number before opening it. Inside is information about errors in the records of seven beneficiaries, information that proves useful when checked. A separate field is subsequently created for an unknown sender, so that a verifiable fact need not be lost merely because the person who reports it has not disclosed a name.

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Story 477 · The Shadow Signature

An old image of an officer's signature is included as an example on a training draft for the approval of assistance. When that image is printed on real letters, it is mistaken for authorisation, and Kamala Devi and several other beneficiaries receive payments before any formal decision has been made. Meera Karn, the officer concerned, explains that the shape of the signature is hers, but the decisions on those letters are not. After investigation, cases that qualify are given valid approvals, and the specimen signature is removed from the form.

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Story 478 · Serial Number 000

Malati Devi submits the first application of the new year, but the numbering system assigns it '000', a number reserved for testing. Although her papers have been handed in, no valid receipt is generated. Archana Jha collects evidence of when the documents were received and how they were checked. By a special decision, '000' is recognised as a genuine application, and Malati's assistance is approved. A new rule requires the testing of the numbering system to be completed before public service begins.

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Story 479 · A Witness to the Living

Devnarayan Mandal's fingerprints cannot be captured clearly, so two witnesses are required to certify that he is alive for the purposes of old-age assistance. Harihar, the first witness, gives his testimony, but dies before the second witness can be verified. The computer then invalidates the first statement. Rupa explains that the validity of testimony must be judged at the moment it was given. Once the rule is corrected, Devnarayan's assistance resumes, and the truthful evidence supplied by a witness now dead remains part of the record.

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Story 480 · The Last Task of a Closed Department

The rehabilitation cell has been formally abolished, but a final decision is still pending on the compensation for Kamala Devi's land, delayed for twelve years. Shashikant, a clerk, must navigate papers bearing the old office name and seal, uncertain powers of approval and an employee number that has been deactivated. Under a special order, Kamala receives the compensation still due to her. Yet Shashikant's own honorarium and the formal termination of his service remain unsettled. Closing a department, the story shows, does not automatically extinguish the human obligations it leaves behind.

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Story 481 · Two Tickets

Ganesh is offered three months of construction work in Delhi, while his wife, Lalita, has a chance to train as a health assistant in Patna. The family's savings cannot cover both journeys. Without telling her, Ganesh returns his ticket and uses the money to pay Lalita's training fees. Lalita, equally unaware of his decision, returns her own ticket to pay for Ganesh's registration. At the station they discover what each has sacrificed for the other. The train departs without them, but the hope of another opportunity remains. They have learnt how much might have been saved by speaking openly to one another.

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Story 482 · The Box of Bangles

For years Sarita has kept the bangles given to her by her mother, intending them for her daughter Manjari's wedding. When a goldsmith examines them, they prove to be brass with a golden coating, not gold. Beneath the lining of the box, however, a letter and a receipt from Sarita's mother explain the truth: the real gold had long ago been sold to redeem the family's mortgaged courtyard and rooms. At her wedding, Manjari accepts both the imitation bangles and the letter as part of the family's remembrance. Its true wealth lies not in the metal but in the home preserved and in a mother's sacrifice.

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Story 483 · The Red Sweater

Meera cannot bring herself to throw away the old brown blanket that belonged to her late father. Memories of the flood and of her childhood remain woven into it. Saraswati Devi, meanwhile, wants a new warm garment for her daughter. Unbeknownst to each other, both approach the same centre where old wool is unravelled and knitted anew. From the wool of that one blanket come a red sweater for the daughter and a light blanket for the mother. Dark strands left among the new stitches continue to bind the two garments to the memories of the old one.

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Story 484 · Across the Pond

Returning from the city, Madhav brings the survey papers for the land on the far side of the pond and discusses them with his father, Harimohan Jha. A red thread marks the boundary, yet women and children of the village cross there every day by a short path. Rising land prices stand against a long-established common passage. His father reminds Madhav of his mother's old custom. When he sees children negotiating a loosened boundary peg, Madhav lifts the thread to let them through and considers driving the peg deeper into the hard earth. Rather than a grand declaration, the change takes place in the quiet movement of his hands.

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Story 485 · Three Empty Chairs

At the feast for Archana's wedding, Janardan sets apart three chairs. They are meant for Ramcharit, the cook; Phulo Kaki, who looks after the leaf plates; and Nandu, who serves water. All three spend the day attending to guests and never find a place to sit until the final sitting. Though invited to take those chairs at night, they go to eat in the kitchen, as they have always done. The chairs remain empty. In that emptiness appears the distance between a wish to seat everyone as equals and the habits that years of labour have taught the workers themselves.

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Story 486 · Evening on the Embankment

The river's erosion is swallowing the fields of the brothers Jagdish and Ramakant. Carrying the measuring cord inherited from their father, they climb the embankment to mark the boundary of what remains. Yet in the face of crumbling earth, the old meaning of a boundary peg begins to diminish. Instead of setting the red-marked bamboo stakes along the edges of their fields, the brothers use them to support the collapsing soil beside a drainage channel in the embankment. They ask the surveyor to postpone the measurement until the floodwater has receded.

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Story 487 · The Last Local Train

After thirty-one years of service, Upendra Jha is travelling home on the last local train of the night. On the platform he meets Madhav, who has left his former trade and is setting out to begin a new job on the night shift. Upendra's regular railway journey has come to an end, but the altered rhythm awaiting him at home feels unfamiliar. Madhav's uncertain journey has only begun. Sharing memories of work and family, the two ride in the same compartment. At one station the older man gets off; the other travels onward into the darkness.

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Story 488 · Half a Glass of Water

In a hospital waiting room, Jaynarayan and his wife Kamala wait for test results and the doctor's decision. Between them lie a file of papers and half a glass of water. Neither speaks directly of the fear within. Instead, they talk of buses, salt, oil and other ordinary matters at home. Kamala goes inside for further examination and returns, but the result is still uncertain. In their small attempts to offer each other the water left in the glass, the depth of their concern and affection makes itself felt without either finding the words to name it.

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Story 489 · The Verandah Bulb

The bulb in the shared verandah of Ramprasad Jha's house goes out. His sons, Surendra and Naresh, now living in separate portions of the house, each bring a bulb of their own. But the fault is not in the bulb: it is a loose connection in the old common wiring. Together they move a wooden bench, open the plaster and repair the wire. The light comes on, although the old line of division across the floor is still faintly visible. At last their father switches off the bulb, leaving the shared bench in the middle of the verandah.

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Story 490 · Two Kathas of Sand

River erosion has left part of Shivnath Mandal's field buried beneath sand. He measures the damage with his son Bipin, but refuses to regard everything as lost. They cut a channel to hold water in the surviving eastern portion of the field. Their neighbour Ramsevak shares labour and spare paddy seedlings with them. Rice is transplanted on the land that remains cultivable; the sandy portion lies empty. Bipin wants to cut a knot from the measuring cord because it now seems useless, but his father stops him. The loss is acknowledged, and the work of living with it goes on.

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Story 491 · The Silent Radio

Sonu, the grandson, brings out an old radio that has been silent for three years. Raghunath Babu takes it to Naseem Mian for repair, so that they can once again hear the weather reports, river-level bulletins and information for farmers. The damaged cord is replaced, but an old, crooked screw is left where it is, since there is no need to remove it. News and songs return to the house. Raghunath explains that something which still works need not be changed merely to give it a new shine.

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Story 492 · Shoes Left on the Roof

Abhay must leave home to take up a job at a textile factory in Surat. Before the journey he puts his old, wet shoes on the roof to dry. His mother, father and Neha talk about the luggage, tickets, food and the worn soles of the shoes, never quite speaking of the sorrow of parting. At dawn Abhay puts on those same shoes and departs. After he has gone, his father climbs to the roof, notices the dry marks left by the shoes and moves away the bricks lying there. An ordinary object has become the trace of the family's unspoken farewell.

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Story 493 · One Cup of Tea Less

Harinath used to make three cups of tea each morning at his shop. Now that his wife Sumitra has taken a job keeping the register at the milk-collection centre, only two cups are made. In dealing with customers and the shop's unpaid accounts, Harinath discovers how much unacknowledged work she once did and how closely she understood the smallest details of the business. Slowly he begins to keep a new register in his own way and learns to deal with the customers himself. The third cup, standing upside down, remains a silent sign of the changed routine.

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Story 494 · The Bamboo Bridge

The village's bamboo bridge weakens in the rains. Hariprasad and Ramjatan, who have not spoken for twelve years because of a dispute over a path through their land, arrive at opposite ends. To clear a branch caught in the water and shore up the bridge, they have to work together. They help children and an elderly woman cross. The next morning they return with bamboo to repair it properly. The old quarrel has not been settled, but a moment of danger has opened a passage through shared labour.

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Story 495 · The Half-Cut Mango

After the division of their house, a wall stands between Janardan and Madhav, although the old mango tree remains common to both. As they begin cutting a branch that overhangs the roof, rain interrupts the work, leaving it half severed. That night Madhav props up its weight with bamboo. In the morning the two men lower the branch safely together and gather the green mangoes. The two halves of one partly cut mango find their way into the separate homes. As they dress the cut on the tree, there remains the possibility of tending what is left of their relationship as well.

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Story 496 · The Fishing Net

The Kamala River is eating its way towards Dharanidhar's house. His son Mohan identifies a safer place in the raised homestead plot and begins moving seeds and other stores there, but his father cannot bring himself to speak of leaving the house. While fishing, Dharanidhar sees the hollowed bank and the river's altered course for himself. When cracks begin to widen in the verandah, he agrees to prepare a new roof at the higher site. At dawn, the first thing father and son spread out in the raised yard is the fishing net.

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Story 497 · Smoke at Daybreak

Malati must leave her home and live with her sister in order to work at a distant centre. On the morning of her departure, she prepares food as usual for her parents-in-law and the rest of the family. Everyone speaks of provisions and the journey, but remains silent about the change about to enter their domestic life. Her mother-in-law promises to take charge of the work that will remain. Malati leaves the key to the grain room behind and boards the vehicle. Smoke rising from beneath the ashes of the hearth recalls the old intimacy of the home.

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Story 498 · A Bicycle Without a Bell

Madhav Jha takes his old bicycle to Kesho, the repairer. He has the brakes, wheels and inner tube put right, but does not want the bell, crooked carrier or torn saddle replaced merely for the sake of appearance. Later a woman carrying a walking stick arrives and slowly attempts to ride a bicycle again. Without a bell, she calls out to people herself, asking them to make way, and moves down the road. Her return to movement is possible without erasing the familiar shape of an old machine.

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Story 499 · Five Minutes Late

Water from a tube well is shared among five households according to a fixed timetable. Mahendra arrives five minutes late because he has been untying his calf. His childhood friend Dayakant, following the written rule, has already diverted the flow. Several of Mahendra's garden beds remain dry, and a chill enters their friendship. Sonma's turn must also begin on time. At the next irrigation, the two friends sit together well before their allotted hour. The delicate tension between a rule and a relationship remains unresolved.

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Story 500 · The Broken Field Boundary

Heavy rain breaches the earthen boundary between Devnath's and Raghunath's fields in three places. An old dispute over water had ended contact between the two families. To save the crops that remain, they fill the gaps together and replace the old blocked drainage outlet with a new bamboo channel. Naval and Chanda can once again walk along the boundary on their way to school. The embankment stands firm, yet a way has also been kept open for water and for people to pass.

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Katha-Tridhara · Volume III

Complete unabridged story summaries · 837 stories

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Story 501 · School Shoes

Moti Paswan has the opportunity to cultivate six kathas of land on a sharecropping basis, but cannot afford both the maize seed and a new pair of school shoes for his daughter Sarita, whose old shoes are torn. Seeing the chafed skin on her heels, he decides to buy the shoes, and the land passes to another cultivator. Later, working for wages in that very field, he receives some ears of maize. He saves five of them as seed for the next sowing. The hard choice between his daughter's education and the future of his farming shapes the life before him.

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Story 502 · The Sacks of Paddy

Rambriksha Yadav takes thirteen sacks of paddy to the government procurement centre, hoping to raise money for his wife Dulari's medicines. The entire consignment is rejected as too damp. With no other choice, he sells one sack at a low price to buy the medicine, then dries the rest of the grain with his family. On his second visit, the remaining twelve sacks are accepted. Yet he has suffered losses through reduced weight, transport costs and the earlier distress sale. Rambriksha understands the calculation of that loss, while also recognising the necessity of getting the medicine to Dulari in time.

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Story 503 · The Panchayat Tap

A public water tap approved for the western hamlet is installed inside the private gate of Navalkishore Singh. At first everyone can fetch water easily, but gradually restrictions on the hours of access and arbitrary household rules begin to disrupt the women's daily lives. Malati, Shanti and the other women agree that if one of them is refused water, all will speak up together. Navalkishore, meanwhile, needs their labour to save his mung-bean crop. After discussion, a bamboo screen separates the privacy of his house from the tap, and free access to the public water supply is secured.

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Story 504 · The Price of an Ox

For twelve years, Dukhna Yadav's ageing ox Basant has been the mainstay of the family's farming. Now its legs are failing, while the costs of fodder and ploughing for the winter crop are mounting. Dukhna's son Kishun wants to sell it. Dukhna considers not only the price but also the cattle shed of the prospective buyer, Ramsevak, and the arrangements for the animal's rest and care. The proceeds meet the farm's pressing expenses. Some days later, Dukhna sees Basant healthy and pulling a light cart. He is reassured, though he still feels the absence of his long-time companion.

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Story 505 · Wages

At the brick kiln, the wages of Ramphal Sada and his family are calculated for each thousand bricks they make. Small numbers of bricks left over at the end of a count are not entered in the register, and the family repeatedly loses wages it has earned. Chanda, who attends evening classes, works through the arithmetic and discovers the discrepancy. She marks the remaining bricks separately. With the support of other workers' families, a system is established in which both complete thousands and the leftover bricks are counted openly before the workers. Not all the old arrears are recovered, but even fifty bricks can no longer vanish from the new accounts.

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Story 506 · The Aadhaar Thumbprint

The worn ridges of elderly Phulmanti Devi's fingers cannot be read by the fingerprint machine at the ration shop, and she is refused her grain. Her neighbour Ramcharit will not accept the informal expedient of using his own thumbprint to collect her share. Instead he lends her two seers of rice and accompanies her to seek the authorised alternative means of verification. With the required evidence, Phulmanti receives her ration in her own name and repays the rice in full. When the fingerprint scan fails the following month, the alternative procedure is available. The difference between assistance, dignity and an enforceable right is made plain.

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Story 507 · The Maize Field

To keep wild boar out of his maize field, Maheshwar Mahato spends night after night on a raised watch platform. His son Ratan is caught between a mathematics examination at school and guarding the crop. Maheshwar sells a few green ears to reduce his losses and, despite the difficulties of fatigue and lost sleep, releases Ratan from the night watch so that he can prepare for the examination. The harvest yields one sack less than expected. When his studies are over, Ratan returns to help with the farm work. Their conversations bring together the labour of cultivation and a shared responsibility for education.

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Story 508 · The Debt Left by the Flood

Flooding in the Kamala River damages the grain, seed and fields of Lakshman Mahato. To pay the interest on a loan taken for the next sowing, he plants quick-selling peas on three kathas instead of wheat. The peas bring in enough to meet the interest, but the principal remains unpaid and his wheat harvest is smaller. After harvest he sells three sacks of wheat to make the first instalment. To protect their seed from the next flood, Lakshman and Sarju Devi build a raised storage platform against the wall of their house in advance.

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Story 509 · The Little Teacher

Upendra, an unemployed graduate, teaches village children in the verandah of an old oil press. People mockingly call him the 'little teacher'. His own future remains uncertain because he has not succeeded in examinations for employment. Yet he teaches Gauri and the other children not to memorise answers blindly, but to ask questions, look for reasons and explain what they learn in their own language. Gauri's father is doubtful at first, then allows her to continue. Even amid the commotion of a wedding, the children come looking for Upendra with questions. It is there that his real identity as a teacher emerges.

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Story 510 · Smoke from the Hearth

A gas cylinder provided under a public assistance scheme brings smoke-free cooking to the home of Jamuna and Harinandan, and the elderly Mahesari's cough begins to ease. But when the cylinder runs empty, the family cannot immediately afford the expensive refill. They return to the wood-burning hearth and build a sloping tin cover over a vent to let the smoke escape during the rains. Little by little they save enough to refill the cylinder, though both cooking arrangements continue to be used according to circumstances. Domestic health, the cost of fuel and unequal access to conveniences remain in a difficult practical balance.

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Story 511 · A One-Katha Pond

Jhallo Sahni and Phulo meet the essential expenses of their household by catching small fish in a pond barely one katha in area. When Doman Chaudhary begins raising rohu and catla there, he ropes off the pond's landing place with bamboo and cord, threatening Jhallo's livelihood. As the water deteriorates, Jhallo draws on his experience to suggest ways of draining it and bringing in fresh water. Doman comes to recognise that looking after a pond requires the knowledge of those who have long lived by it. In the end, part of the landing place is reopened. The right to catch small fish and the new fish-farming enterprise continue side by side, each under the limits of a negotiated agreement.

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Story 512 · The Packet of Seeds

Hoping for an early crop and a favourable price, Shyamnandan Mahato buys hybrid okra seeds from the market. His wife, Dulari, also keeps the indigenous seeds saved at home. Heavy rain destroys several rows of the hybrid plants. Dulari germinates the older seeds and sows them in the empty spaces, allowing cultivation to continue, though the harvest comes later. The hybrid crop brings a profit at the first market, while the home-saved seed proves a safeguard when adversity strikes. For the following season, Shyamnandan chooses not to depend on either alone: he arranges to buy fewer packets of hybrid seed and to sow some of the indigenous seed kept by the family.

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Story 513 · Two Goats

The two goats of the widow Kamla Devi, Dhauri and Kajri, are her movable wealth, the means by which she meets the cost of her daughter Sunita's college education. Kajri dies and Dhauri falls ill, shaking the family's hopes of future income. To pay Sunita's examination fee, Kamla takes an advance against four days of labour, then works those days to settle the account. Sunita helps to nurse Dhauri while continuing her studies. Through stringent savings and additional work, she is able to sit her examination. Yet Kajri's empty tethering peg and the rope the family has kept remain visible witnesses to a loss that no account of wages can erase.

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Story 514 · The Labour Card

At a construction site in Surat, the labour contractor Jagesar keeps the labour cards of Nandlal Paswan and other migrant workers locked in his own box. The workers are thus denied full control over the documents that establish their identities. At a workers' assistance camp, Nandlal learns that a duplicate can be obtained from the register and that the original card ought to remain with its owner. After securing a new copy, he demands and recovers his original from Jagesar. One by one, other labourers reclaim their cards as well. The balance of power at the worksite does not change altogether, but the contractor's ability to control them through their identity papers is diminished.

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Story 515 · The House of Earth

The first instalment of housing assistance gives Jitan Paswan hope of building a new brick house. But the second instalment does not arrive, and the roof remains unfinished as the rains approach. From the ruined room of their old earthen house, the family salvages bamboo poles, doorframes and roof tiles, using them to put a temporary covering inside the new walls. During wind and rain, this makeshift shelter saves the sacks of paddy and the books. Jitan and Phulkumari use the remaining cement to protect the tops of the walls. Their dream of a permanent masonry house remains incomplete, yet the materials of the old dwelling provide immediate refuge within the new one.

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Story 516 · The Loan Document

Sugna Mahato borrows eighteen thousand rupees for cultivation, although he cannot read the terms of the loan agreement or calculate the interest. With his daughter's help, he learns to recognise the figures and work out what he owes. He sells part of his maize to pay an instalment on time, holding back the remaining grain in the hope of a higher price. When offered a new loan that would absorb an earlier debt of twelve thousand rupees, he has the conditions read aloud and declines. Earnings from pigeon peas and wheat enable him to clear the remaining instalments. At last, on the receipt, he can identify for himself the words 'Balance—Zero'.

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Story 517 · Paddy in the Common Granary

The paddy stored in the communal granary of Sonbarsa hamlet is a reserve for families in distress. As grain prices rise in the month of Sawan, some members propose selling the stock to create a cash fund. The headwoman, Vimla Devi, and others insist that the needs of hungry households must come first. A collective reckoning shows that the village would gain less by selling the paddy than its families would later have to spend buying grain from outside. The paddy is therefore distributed on loan. At harvest time, Budhni returns the first sack together with the additional quantity agreed upon. The granary remains a common resource rather than a sum of money on paper.

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Story 518 · The First Harvest

After eight years of work in Surat, Nayan Mandal returns home and plans his first crop, entering every expected expense in a register. He assumes that twelve labourers will be available on a particular day, but at transplanting time the arrival of water and the availability of workers fail to coincide. The portion planted late produces a smaller yield. From the experienced Budhan Paswan, Nayan learns that agricultural labour is not simply a matter of wages paid in cash; it also depends on neighbours helping one another at the right moment. In his calculations for the following season, he makes explicit provision for beraberi, the reciprocal exchange of labour, and for the timing of the work itself.

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Story 519 · The Locked Room in Madhubani

In an old mural inside his locked room, the painter Kaushal Paswan thinks he sees the eye of a fish, a branch of kadamba and three dots changing their appearance. His pupil Chandrakala examines the painting as it stands and notices traces of fresh colour on Kaushal's hand. At last, Kaushal admits that Renuka did more work on the mural than he did, but that he concealed her contribution and painted out the three dots. The room is thereafter kept open. Whether dampness, old pigments or memory account for the seeming alterations in the picture remains unresolved; what has finally emerged into the open is the truth the artist had suppressed.

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Story 520 · The Sound of a Bell

Night after night, a bell-like ringing inside the wall of an old mansion troubles Shailkant Jha. It awakens the memory of an old wrong. The servant Bhola had gone to see his sick daughter, Paro, but Shailkant, afraid of the master, denied having given him permission, causing Bhola to lose both his job and his wages. With his niece's help, Shailkant writes a correction to the old register and hands the document to Bhola. During repairs, a loose, rusted wire is found to be the physical source of the ringing. Yet the discovery of its cause, and even the handing over of the correction, do not bring Shailkant immediate forgiveness.

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Story 521 · The Pond's Eye

The narrator spends the night on a raised watch platform guarding the fish in Kajrahi pond. Among the water weeds, a black, circular patch appears to him like the pond's 'eye', and fear takes hold of him. Unfamiliar footprints, splashes in the water and the shifting dark ring deepen his unease. One night the earth of the embankment gives way, and he becomes trapped in the mud before struggling free. Bauku Sahni explains how an old spring and the currents beneath the surface could account for what has happened; the embankment is repaired. Yet even after the water weeds have been cleared, the circles rising in the pond do not wholly dispel the narrator's fear or uncertainty.

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Story 522 · Inside the Wall

While repairing the damp wall of an old house, Shashibhushan Chaudhary discovers a clay bird that makes a whistling sound. He believes it belongs to a memory of his childhood and of Manjari. But conversations with his sister and an elderly potter reveal disagreements about where the object lay, its colour and the events associated with it. One recollection becomes entangled with another; no one can determine how far the discovery itself has altered the pictures of the past. The wall is rebuilt, and the little clay bird is placed on a shelf. Its presence is beyond dispute, but its verifiable history remains uncertain.

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Story 523 · Soot

Marks of soot repeatedly appear on the wall of an old kitchen. For Malati, they recall the day Gauri was prevented from pursuing her studies and sitting an examination. Years before, frightened of the household's disapproval, Malati had refused to open the rear gate, and Gauri had lost her chance to take the examination. When the two meet again, that long-buried guilt comes to the surface. A mason suggests that an old oil stain might make a shape reappear in smoke, but the mark emerges once more even through a fresh coat of plaster. The uncertain boundary between remorse, recollection and physical coincidence is left open.

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Story 524 · The Lantern

Ramautar, the watchman of an old seed storehouse, keeps a lantern burning every night even though there is no electricity. His assistant, Birendra, discovers the reason for his fear when a storm blows the lantern out and Ramautar speaks of the night relief grain was stolen. At an officer's bidding, he had handed over the gate key, extinguished the lantern and given false testimony against an innocent labourer, Lakshman. The loose fastening of the gate and the damaged roof are subsequently repaired, but the old incident remains alive within Ramautar. Birendra now understands the duty of tending the lantern in an altogether different light.

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Story 525 · Seven Steps

Seven steps descend to the basement of the printing press, yet Nawal, its owner, hears a mysterious knock after the seventh. The sound recalls an incident from his adolescence. Jealous of his maternal cousin Gopal, he had spoken of an imaginary eighth step in the dark, and Gopal had fallen and injured his wrist. In the present, workmen discover that a loose iron pin and a wooden support have been producing a delayed knock. The sound ceases after the repair, but the recollection of what Nawal did remains with him. He stops counting the stairs.

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Story 526 · The Closed Clock Tower

A clock repairer in Benipatti sees that the hands of the closed clock tower across from him have stopped at twelve minutes past four. One night he hears eight strokes of its bell, recalling an incident twenty-eight years earlier when his misconduct caused blame to fall upon Majeed Miyan, an employee of the tower. An inspection reveals a loose metal strip that could have made the sound; another witness had heard only a single stroke. The clockmaker confesses his old lie to Majeed's son, Samad. The tower remains silent, but he has begun to confront the time arrested within his own conscience.

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Story 527 · A White Feather

The repeated appearance of white feathers in the locked storeroom of a seed merchant leaves him increasingly disturbed. He counts the feathers, marks them and keeps watch through the night, yet his recollection of their number and location refuses to agree with what he finds. During repairs, Mahendra discovers the remains of a dead pigeon and its feathers trapped in an old roof pipe. Once the opening is sealed, no new feathers appear. Even so, a feather bearing a spot of kajal is subsequently found inside an old register. The merchant burns it, but doubts about the reliability of his sleep and memory persist.

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Story 528 · The Last Portrait

Vinod Jha, a photographer in Laheriasarai, makes final portraits of the dead. He is deeply unsettled when an unknown young man's face seems to appear in the clouded glass of his father's old wooden camera. A glass specialist explains how stains, light and angle can together produce an apparent likeness. When the glass is replaced, his work proceeds normally, yet the face seems to return on the old pane. Vinod comes to understand how the eye and mind give the form of an identity to an indistinct mark. Thereafter, the experience changes the way he looks at the subjects of his last portraits.

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Story 529 · Water in the Basement

After the floodwaters recede, Amresh Sah, a craftsman working in brass and bell-metal, hears a persistent dripping in his basement, although no fresh water is visible on the ceiling or walls. His assistant Jugal hears it too. Blocking a pipe, installing an electric light and tracing the direction of the sound fail to account for every drop he seems to hear. Kaushalya helps him recognise the anxiety produced by his ceaseless measuring and checking. Amresh begins to take five breaths before examining the place again. Even after a mysterious mark appears on a dry bowl, he continues with his craft rather than surrendering all his days to the unexplained sound.

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Story 530 · A Line in the Night

Neelkanth Jha, temporarily employed as the night record-keeper at a cremation ground, sees his own name in the register of the dead, as though it were a grey impression on the page. He cancels the entry, but an inspector explains that writing pressed onto a sheet laid above it can leave just such a trace. A possible source is found, although the positions of the letters cannot be made to agree completely. At the end of his fifteen-day assignment, Neelkanth returns to his regular office. When he later looks again at the cremation-ground register, the mysterious impression has faded, but his caution before an empty line has not.

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Story 531 · The Door Chain

In Sakri, the heavy door of the silversmith Deepnarayan Sah's house is found open at night despite the chain having been fastened. Fearing theft, he scatters ash, stretches a thread across the entrance and arranges a watch, but none of these measures settles the matter. He notices the left side of the door moving when a train passes. The carpenter Ramudgar finds wood eaten by insects and a loose pivot, and repairs the damage. The door stays shut thereafter. Still, whenever Deepnarayan hears a faint metallic click at night, he considers that metal may contract with the temperature, and makes a habit of checking the left hinge as well as the chain.

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Story 532 · A Heartbeat

Dr Prabhakar Mishra hears a sound like a heartbeat in the locked rear room of his clinic. Its rhythm returns him to the unresolved memory of Saryu, a former patient, and the hour of Saryu's death. A plumber finds a fragment of leather and a rusted ring inside a pipe; their repeated collision has caused the sound. When the pipe is removed, the room falls silent. Yet at home, as Prabhakar listens to his own pulse, he finds himself searching for the same rhythm once again. The explanation of an external noise has not answered the question that memory continues to ask.

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Story 533 · The Black Mirror

Malati Devi, who runs a shop selling lacquer bangles and vermilion in Madhubani, sometimes thinks that her reflection moves a moment late in an old mirror stained with black patches. Her daughter Chanda repeatedly points out that Malati had already moved her hand. A glazier explains the effects of the damaged backing and overlapping reflections, and repairs the mirror. Even with its new backing, Malati senses a moment's delay. She begins to admit that the discrepancy may lie not in the glass but in the act of seeing itself. In the end, she gives up testing the mirror and turns her attention to the people before her and to their work.

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Story 534 · Footsteps on the Roof

Ramballabh Das, who fits skins to mridang drums, hears what seem to be heavy footsteps on his roof at night, although there is no permanent staircase leading to it. Ash is spread to look for footprints, but no clear marks appear. An old bamboo rainwater spout is found striking the wall and making a sound. Tying it in place brings quiet, though an occasional thud is still heard. Even after the spout is removed altogether, a noise and a faint scraping return one night. Rather than spend his life pursuing the mystery, Ramballabh goes back to his work on the drums.

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Story 535 · The Smell of a Letter

Shashinath Jha, a retired postal worker, detects in an old letter from his ancestral trunk a damp smell mingled with kerosene and ink. It recalls an incident at the post office when a temporary watchman, Ramphal, was blamed for opening a postal article, and Shashinath, out of fear, had failed to speak the truth. Airing the letter lessens its odour, but the smell of rain or of other objects reawakens the guilt of that earlier silence. Shashinath does not throw the letter away. He accepts the uneasy presence of memory and continues with the ordinary work of his days.

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Story 536 · The Neelkanth

In Manigachhi, Phulo Devi believes that the call of the neelkanth bird is a sign of impending misfortune, and stops the family from cracking makhana and taking the produce to market. The delay reduces the amount of goods they can sell, yet an injury and an old family memory seem to confirm her belief. Her daughter-in-law Saroja observes how even those who disagree can learn to obey a rule born of fear. One night a sound rising from a crack in a cooking pan resembles the bird's call. The next morning the bird truly calls, but the family goes on working; this time, Phulo Devi does not extinguish the cooking fire.

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Story 537 · The Other Room

While staying at a hotel in Jaynagar, the narrator sees another door behind room number eighteen at night, although no such room appears on the building plan. When damp plaster is removed, a mason points out the rectangular pattern of bricks where an old doorway was once sealed. Fresh plaster makes the outline disappear, but rain and moisture bring it back. A sound like the turning of pages seems to come from within; its ordinary source could equally well be the neighbouring room. The narrator leaves the hotel carrying two things together: knowledge of the solid wall and the mystery he has felt in its presence.

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Story 538 · Beneath the Earth

Workers digging in the sunken courtyard of an ancestral house in Khajauli come upon a small, rusted metal box. The owner has an uncanny sense of already remembering its latch, its location and a blue object inside. He cannot distinguish what belongs to childhood recollection from what may be conjecture. One night his body seems to count its own steps and carry him to another spot in the courtyard, but digging there yields nothing. The ground is levelled again. The box remains on a shelf, while the question of what the body itself may remember stays alive within its owner.

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Story 539 · The Official Stamp

The round brass face of an official stamp disappears at the local revenue office, bringing the issue of certified copies to a halt. Clerks, officers and constables become entangled in searches and the writing of reports. Eventually the missing face is discovered inside a securely stored sample file: a loose screw had caused it to come away. In the name of preventing another loss, the stamp is now fastened to the desk with a short chain. It can no longer be carried as far as the service window, and the queue of citizens grows longer still.

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Story 540 · The Autobiography of a File

A government file born from a request to repair a broken footbridge across an irrigation channel tells its own story. The brief petition of twenty-seven villagers travels through departments, notings, inspections and orders from senior officers, swelling from seven pages to fifty-nine. Meanwhile the villagers build a temporary crossing themselves. The administration's final decision goes no further than a fresh inspection, and the file is consigned to the archives. A few months later, another petition arrives, this time asking for repairs to that same makeshift crossing. The file's expanding pages expose the distance between the growth of paperwork and the actual needs of the people.

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Story 541 · Chair Number Seventeen

Bankeshwar Jha, a clerk in the Irrigation Office, longs to occupy chair number seventeen beside the window. So determined is he to secure that particular seat that he even forgoes an opportunity for promotion. At last the coveted chair becomes his. By then, however, a wall for the new records repository has risen immediately outside the window. The sunshine, the breeze and the view of the road have all disappeared. Invoking the strict requirements of the rules, he refuses another proposal to rearrange the seating. Instead, he carefully darkens the red number painted on his chair with fresh ink. His attachment to the emblem of a position has become a deception he practises upon himself.

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Story 542 · The Spelling of a Name

In the Horticulture Office's annual report, the officer Nagendra Jha finds his name printed as 'Nāgendra', with an extra vowel sign in place of 'Nagendra'. To correct this small error, committee follows committee, the costs are calculated, and the applications of farmers whose crops have been damaged by hail remain pending. Work proceeds only when the officer writes out the correction himself and certifies it. By the time the printed correction slip arrives, he has been transferred. The new officer's handwritten name, too, shows a variation in spelling. This time the clerk Baleshwar resolves to dispose of the farmers' applications first.

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Story 543 · The Great Inspection

News of an impending inspection throws the Weights and Measures Office into a frenzy. Dust is swept away, defective instruments are hidden, and a carefully ordered display is prepared. By chance, the district inspector mistakes the neighbouring cooperative paddy store for the government office and goes there instead. Seeing grain actually being weighed, farmers lodging complaints and business conducted in the open, he records a favourable assessment. Afterwards, the government office begins providing a regular service near the storehouse, in an effort to make the inspector's praise true. When the next report is prepared, the officer bases it on experience of work actually done rather than on an arrangement devised for display.

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Story 544 · A Proposal for a Fan

A proposal to replace the broken fan in the Circle Office passes through seven stages of administrative approval. During the heat, the staff carry their tables out to the veranda and continue working there, while visitors fan themselves by hand. Approval takes its time. When the purchase order finally arrives, no fan can be bought at the old quoted price, so fresh permission is required for the higher cost. The new fan is installed by the month of Ashwin, after the heat has subsided. Yet the employees do not carry their tables back indoors: keeping them on the veranda has made the office more convenient for the people it serves.

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Story 545 · The God of the Office

An old cupboard in the Records Office is known as the 'god of the office', for complicated files placed inside it seem to vanish as though by divine intervention. Sudeep Mishra, a new clerk, grows suspicious while searching for Chandreshwar Mahato's long-pending file. When the cupboard is moved for repairs, one hundred and twenty-seven old files emerge from a gap in the wall. The office must acknowledge the true weight of these invisible arrears and set the applications in motion again. The cupboard is now kept away from the wall. Seeing a newly arrived file, even a senior clerk sits down to read it instead of looking for somewhere to hide it.

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Story 546 · The Signature

Ramlochan Pandit, a potter, needs a single signature from the district crafts officer to receive the assistance already sanctioned for an electric potter's wheel. He wanders through room after room, unaware that the officer himself is sitting nearby, drinking tea in ordinary clothes. As soon as the man's identity becomes known, the signature is given. A task that has consumed almost the entire day is completed in moments. On his way home, Ramlochan notices that the tea seller's own payment papers are about to be sent from desk to desk in the name of further verification. The story exposes the unequal privilege of access and the absurd circuits through which ordinary people are made to pass.

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Story 547 · The Special Cap

The khadi cap worn by Shambhunath Karna, the new seed-certification officer, bears two stitches of blue thread. His subordinates begin to seek the secret of his promotion and efficiency in that cap, and have identical caps made for themselves. Yet the next promotion goes to the diligent Devkant Paswan, who never wears a cap at all. It is eventually learned that Shambhunath wore his to shield an old wound from the sun, and that his daughter had made the blue stitches to mend a torn edge. Even then, the employees cannot bring themselves to abandon their faith in the cap as a symbol of advancement.

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Story 548 · The Tea Committee

For years the officer in the Drainage Office has disliked the tea supplied by Chandrakala Devi's shop. A committee is appointed to examine its flavour, aroma, temperature and price. Over five meetings the committee spends a considerable sum on drinking tea. In the end it issues recommendations so vague that they settle almost nothing, while payment of Chandrakala's old dues remains withheld. Her tea continues much as before, with minor adjustments in quantity and sugar. The bills for the committee's expenditure, however, are cleared first. Through this small transaction, the story reveals the real economic burden concealed inside a pointless administrative procedure.

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Story 549 · The Missing Bell

The old bell that has hung at Pathrahi Middle School since 1956 disappears. Headmaster Manbodh Jha and the attendant Mahavir begin searching for it, but the school's foundation-day celebration soon gives rise to a contest over donors, credit and whose name should be recorded. It emerges that the bell had been taken down on the pretext of measuring it and stored in a warehouse. While rival groups continue debating blame and recognition, Mahavir quietly hangs it in its place again. Its sound restores the rhythm of the school day. Out on the veranda, however, the quarrel over names goes on unabated.

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Story 550 · A Certified Copy

Bhuvaneshwar Mandal, a bamboo craftsman, needs a certified copy of his old artisan identity card to apply for a place at the district fair. Although he presents the original certificate, the clerk demands a copy and certification of that copy. Each new copy brings another request for identification papers and another journey to the office. Eventually the application is submitted, but no one in the office thinks it necessary to examine the craft he actually practises. Bhuvaneshwar keeps his original certificate and receipts carefully. He knows that the cuts on his palms and the marks left by weaving tell the truth of his identity—though no certified copy can reproduce them.

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Story 551 · The Height of the Desk

The new officer in the Agricultural Implements Office has his desk raised by two inches because his knees keep striking its underside. This simple piece of carpentry becomes, among the staff, a question of rank and prestige. Blocks, pieces of cardboard and screws are added to desk after desk, while employees compare the height of their furniture with one another's. In the end, Budhan the carpenter makes the necessary adjustments according to the needs of each person's seat and work. The office gradually returns to normal. A few employees, however, still contrive to preserve an extra inch or two of purely symbolic elevation.

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Story 552 · Red Tape

An official order inaugurating a 'Fortnight for the Elimination of Red Tape' directs offices to mark their pending files with strips of red ribbon. The staff set about organising tenders and procedures for purchasing the ribbon. Suman, a clerk, meanwhile begins disposing of several of the delayed files directly, and many applications move forward. Thousands of metres of red tape arrive only after the work has been done. Practical action finally takes precedence, and the unused ribbon is placed in storage. The label on the bundle of 'surplus materials' is itself tied on with the same red tape—a visible emblem of the contradiction the campaign was meant to overcome.

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Story 553 · The Forgotten Order

At the materials depot in Jaynagar, heavy pipes are not brought through the broad front gate. Instead, labourers haul them around by a long rear route beside the pond. Raghav Mishra, the new storekeeper, discovers that a temporary prohibition imposed four years earlier is still being observed, although the slope that caused the difficulty has long since been repaired. The labourers continue to perform needless extra work. Since no clear record of the old order's cancellation can be found, a fresh order is issued and the main gate is reopened. The obsolete direction board is duly entered in the depot's inventory as an item preserved for its historical value.

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Story 554 · The Government Umbrella

Umbrella number thirty-eight, belonging to the Road Maintenance Department, has been repaired over and over for years. The storekeeper, Gopal Thakur, is astonished by the total cost of its repairs, but his superiors regard the umbrella's preservation as the primary concern. To prevent further expense, a new hook and a protective cover are made for it. When heavy rain falls, Sahdev, a messenger who must go to the post office, will not risk using the government umbrella; he goes out carrying his own torn one instead. In the official register, umbrella number thirty-eight remains 'serviceable and secure', although it serves no one.

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Story 555 · Attendance

The Cooperative Office issues strict instructions to regularise the attendance of employees who habitually arrive late. Its ingenious remedy is to send the attendance register from house to house, so that everyone can sign on time. The signatures appear punctually, but the employees themselves still reach the office late. During an inspection, the full register and the empty chairs expose the deception. The practice of circulating the register is stopped. Gradually the employees begin making an effort to arrive on time, and Naresh, the attendant, keeps the register on its proper desk. The story draws a sharp distinction between attendance recorded on paper and service actually rendered.

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Story 556 · Photographic Identification

Photographic identity cards become compulsory at the office, and the experienced gatekeeper Ramkishun is ordered to trust documents more than his own recognition of faces. Mahendra, an electrical-goods dealer, gains entry with a false identity card, while long-serving employees are stopped whenever they forget theirs. After the incident comes to light, new instructions require the photograph to be compared with the person's actual face. The solution brings its own absurdity: Bhola Jha, a genuine employee, is held outside the gate because the photograph on his old card no longer resembles him.

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Story 557 · The Welcome Gate

To improve access to the public-service centre at Phulparas, the authorities install a brightly coloured welcome gate, signs, benches and lamps. The departmental funds cannot provide an additional employee, so Ramudgar, the centre's sole assistant, is moved from the service window to a welcome desk. The number of visitors grows, but the acceptance of applications all but stops. Ramkali Devi returns again and again, trying to have an error in her widow's pension corrected. The district inspection team praises the splendid welcome, while the closed window inside remains the real obstacle.

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Story 558 · The Annual Report

At the Rural Construction Division, everyone is racing to dispatch the annual report on time. Officers arrange photographs of unfinished works, records of meetings and figures of progress; some totals shrink when checked against the facts. The report is delivered before the deadline of 31 March, and the office counts this as an administrative achievement. Lakhan Paswan, a labourer, is still awaiting payment because one signature has not been obtained, and several projects, including a shelter at the market, remain unfinished. The handsome cover of the published report stands in stark contrast to the worker who continues to wait for his wages.

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Story 559 · Permission to Live

A notice requiring verification of residential permission is pasted to the three-generation-old home of Raghunandan Chaudhary. To obtain official sanction to live in his own house, he must visit office after office. Local officials and neighbours attest to his decades of residence, but the process starts again when he is not at home during an unannounced inspection. At last, permission for permanent residence arrives by post, addressed to the very same house. Raghunandan discovers that, according to the government papers, he has lived there only since the day the permission was granted—even though he has spent his entire life within those walls.

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Story 560 · The Waiting Room

The sub-divisional hospital introduces coloured arrows and a succession of new waiting rooms in an effort to reduce the crowd of patients. Ramsevak Mahato, a farmer seeking treatment for pain in his shoulder, grows exhausted walking from one room to another. The doctor and the patient, each following different instructions, wait for each other in different places. When Ramsevak finally refuses to move to yet another room, the doctor comes to him and completes the examination in five minutes. But to collect his medicine, the farmer must take his place in a sixth waiting room.

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Story 561 · The Number

At the Public Grievances Office, complainants are assigned numbers instead of names, supposedly to reduce favouritism. Ramlochan Yadav, who has come to seek compensation for damage caused by work on a field drainage channel, receives several different numbers in a single day and loses track of which identity is his. When his payment is approved, his real name is suddenly required, but no department has been established to reconnect the numbers with the people. At last, the name concealed beneath a covering on the paper is revealed, and the payment order is completed. Ramlochan understands that a number serves the office's convenience; it does not constitute a person's identity.

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Story 562 · The Case That Remains Open

Teacher Udaykant Paswan receives a letter announcing a departmental inquiry against him, but no account of the allegation is enclosed. He asks to be told what he is accused of; the office first demands his acknowledgement that he has received the charge. After repeated visits, an opened envelope yields only a notice saying that the original charge is held at the district office. The district office demands proof that the case has been registered, and obtaining that proof requires the charge once more. The inquiry remains officially 'open' under a new number, its accusation unknown. Amid this uncertainty, Udaykant continues teaching his classes and conducting examinations at school.

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Story 563 · The Boundary

An invisible new boundary divides the village of Sirkhariya into administrative areas 'A' and 'B'. Devnarayan Mahato, who goes out to sell milk, and other villagers must now obtain permits for their everyday journeys, although the village paths and families extend across both areas. A surveyor tries to mark the boundary along the course of an old stream, but cannot locate a definite line. Ordinary daily movements are eventually exempted from the permit requirement, though disputes remain over special occasions. Rainwater, indifferent to the distinction, continues to flow freely across the two administrative areas.

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Story 564 · Verification

Tilak Paswan, eighty-two years old, has his old-age pension stopped because official proof that he is still alive has not been recorded. Following the office's instructions, he repeatedly leaves home to present himself for verification; meanwhile, the visiting employee, finding him absent from the house, marks his status as uncertain. Eventually a certificate is prepared declaring Tilak dead in the official list. Still very much alive, he carries his own death certificate to the office and applies to have it cancelled. For the next verification he is ordered to remain at home. The visible evidence of a living human being and the government's written entries move in opposite directions.

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Story 565 · The Closed Lift

The numbers on the buttons of a six-storey Cooperative Building's lift are removed and replaced with the names of departments. As those departments are repeatedly shifted, the names cease to correspond to the floors. A safety inspection requires permanent floor numbers, but an administrative order prohibiting them remains in force. Amid partial alterations, fresh notices and a suspension of transfers, the lift stays closed. Dinbandhu, the records carrier, and the visitors resume counting floors as they climb the stairs. Inside the useless lift, the old numbers are still there, waiting to be read.

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Story 566 · The Blank Seal

At the District Cottage Industries Office, no paper is permitted to move forward unless it bears the impression of a rubber stamp with no lettering on it. Mukund, a new employee, asks what exactly such an empty seal is supposed to certify. In the meantime, the file concerning a grant to the craftswoman Champa Devi remains trapped by this singular rule. Even after an inquiry, the officers decide to preserve the old practice. On the inspection papers they make Mukund himself apply the blank stamp. Once again, a mark that conveys no meaning becomes indispensable proof in the machinery of the office.

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Story 567 · The Order at Midnight

An administrative order arriving at midnight is written in signs so obscure that no one in the village can understand it. Nevertheless, everyone is required to report how they have complied. Without clear instructions, people dare not even carry out their ordinary work. When they request clarification, they are told not to do anything contrary to the order's possible intention. The following night another order arrives, this time in Maithili, directing people to report separately whether they understood the first order and whether they obeyed it. Yet the meaning of that first order has still not been translated.

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Story 568 · The Invisible Tax

Shambhunath Sah, a bicycle repairer, receives a demand for an 'Integrated Civic Amenities Tax', though no one can explain its basis or calculation. When he questions the demand, his family's civic-services identification number is deactivated. Access to the library, a travel concession for the elderly, rubbish collection and even the registration of a complaint about the public tap are all obstructed. Eventually he receives a certificate declaring the tax payable to be zero. But no provision exists for restoring the deactivated number. On paper the tax demand has disappeared; in daily life the hardships it caused remain.

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Story 569 · The Wrong Date of Birth

Ramudit Mandal, a skilled bamboo craftsman, applies for an allowance honouring elderly artisans. A registration date entered thirty-eight years earlier has mistakenly been copied into the space for his date of birth. The office therefore treats him as only thirty-eight years old. The clerical error is acknowledged, but without another document proving his birth date it cannot be corrected. Despite a lifetime of experience, he is denied the assistance intended for senior craftsmen. Instead, the office sends him an invitation to attend a beginner's course in bamboo weaving.

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Story 570 · One Door Too Few

Nandkishore Sah's old house has two doors, but only one appears on the plan approved by the municipality. On that basis the rear door is declared illegal. One department orders it to be closed, while another insists that the passage to the drainage channel must remain open. In the end, the lower portion of the doorway is bricked up and the upper passage left open. On the government's plan the wall is now straight and fully compliant with the rules. The people living in the house, however, must continue finding their awkward way through that half-open passage.

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Story 571 · The Return

After twenty-four years of work in a factory in Surat, Devnarayan Mandal returns to Belouncha village to settle there permanently. Under the panchayat's new regulations, however, registration as a ‘returning resident’ requires an official certificate of departure from the village—a document that was never issued twenty-four years ago. Neither the testimony of the former postman nor that of his family can make good the missing entry. At last, an employee records his ‘departure’ and ‘return’ on the same day, one minute apart. For his mother, the separation has lasted twenty-four years; in the government's reckoning, his time away amounts to a single minute.

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Story 572 · Translation

An order setting a weight limit on the old bridge over the Kamala is displayed in four languages, but the translations differ in their statements of the hours and the prohibitions. The bridge guard imposes fines according to his own understanding; Budhan Sadai, who sells earthen pitchers, is among the many people penalised. The office acknowledges the discrepancies in meaning, yet suspends decisions on appeals while continuing to collect outstanding fines. Even the revised order contains a translation error, and the earlier penalties remain in force. On the road across the bridge, the meaning of the rule continues to change, but the amount of each fine remains beyond dispute.

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Story 573 · The Order from the Empty Chair

When the officer in the Agricultural Seeds Office is transferred, his chair stands vacant. Acting on instructions that routine work must not stop, the employees begin submitting proposals and, if no objection arrives, issuing orders in the name of the empty chair. The new officer, Avinash Kumar, arrives and asks to review the earlier orders. But he first signs an instruction allowing them to remain in force and then leaves for training. The employees once more deposit their proposals on the desk beside the vacant chair. A system of orders conducted in a person's absence resumes, this time under the protection of a valid signature.

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Story 574 · The Admission Slip

When the injured labourer Ramji Paswan is brought to Jhanjharpur Hospital for emergency treatment, the guard first demands an admission slip. The regulation requiring the time of admission to be entered, together with the fact that the patient has not actually been allowed inside, entangles the process of treatment. Dr Aniruddh provides the necessary assistance while the staff continue reconciling the times in the register. After an inquiry, a note classifies the treatment as ‘assistance before admission’, and the registration desk is moved. Ramji goes home on crutches, but the distance between a human emergency and admission on paper remains.

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Story 575 · The Frozen Account

Ramlochan Mahato, a bamboo craftsman, wants to withdraw money from a cooperative bank to pay for his daughter Sarita's training. Although his account contains savings, withdrawals have been blocked in the name of a security check. The banking system will not let him take out his money, but it continues to deduct charges for messages and maintenance and to credit interest. His application for reactivation remains pending, while the security inspection regards the account holder's failure to make a single withdrawal as proof of successful control. Ramlochan finally understands that the account is closed to him but remains open to the bank.

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Story 576 · Final Approval

The application submitted by Jagdish Mandal for the loss of his paddy crop in the Kamala floods receives final approval seven months after his death. His widow, Sumitra Devi, goes to the office with his death certificate to collect fourteen thousand eight hundred rupees. The system, however, demands the approved beneficiary's personal presence, while payment to an heir is trapped in a separate procedure. Unable to find an option for recording Jagdish's death, the office repeatedly marks him ‘absent’ and dispatches another notice. Sumitra returns with the approval letter and the notice addressed to her dead husband; the sanctioned relief still awaits payment.

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Story 577 · The Forbidden Question

At the Minor Irrigation Office, the wages recorded in seven files for canal repairs are withheld because the files lack green covers. Employee Madhukant Mishra asks where this rule about colour originally came from. During the ensuing inquiry, his question itself becomes a disciplinary matter, and the office issues a new rule requiring prior permission before anyone may ask about the source of an administrative tradition. Once a consignment of green covers arrives, the outstanding wages of the women labourers, including Kamala Devi, are paid. But Madhukant receives no answer. Only the procedure for asking his question has acquired a fresh restriction.

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Story 578 · The Guarded Door

To renew the registration of his handloom cooperative, Rameshwar Das is directed to 'Entrance Four' of the old Cooperative Building, where the door is locked and guarded. The office counts the number of people waiting as evidence of the service it provides, yet makes no arrangement for them to enter. When people stop coming, thirty days of inactivity are formally certified and the application is redirected to the main gate. Rameshwar's cooperative is eventually renewed, but the delay has reduced the earnings of families dependent on the looms. Although declared inactive, the closed door continues to stand with a new lock and a guard.

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Story 579 · Evening in Laheriasarai

Returning late from his office in Laheriasarai, Arunesh Jha is irritated by the expenses of the household and by his habit of questioning his wife Kumud about the accounts. Watching two people work together at a market stall reminds him of the labour he has failed to notice in his own marriage. He begins to see that Kumud earns money by teaching, manages the household, saves for further training and keeps working despite physical pain. When he reaches home, he asks about the ache in her wrist for the first time, and the two sit down together to reckon their income and expenses. Amid the figures, the shared life behind them becomes visible.

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Story 580 · Lights on the Bridge

For three years, the college student Neelabh has fashioned a love story in his imagination from memories of an exercise book and a song associated with his classmate Rashmi. When he unexpectedly meets Rashmi and her sister Neha on the Kamala bridge, he encounters the reality of her life: laboratory work, her mother's medicines and responsibility for her sister. In the course of an ordinary conversation, the meanings he had imagined in old signs begin to loosen. Neelabh realises that love is not the act of filling another person's mind with one's own desires. He wants to meet Rashmi again, but no longer to prove his fantasy true: he wants to know her as a human being.

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Story 581 · The Closed Library

When an old library in Darbhanga closes for its annual stocktaking, Madhavi, a research scholar, finds her daily routine abruptly suspended. For five years she has been researching women's private writing in old Maithili periodicals, while postponing relationships, meals, the care of her room and even visits to her sister Meena until ‘after the research is finished’. A meeting with a bookbinder and his daughter helps her realise that doing important work does not require putting life itself on hold. Madhavi does not abandon her research; after leaving the library, she decides to visit her sister. For the first time, her scholarship and her personal life find room within the same present.

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Story 582 · After the Fair

On the morning after the Janakpur fair has been dismantled, fifteen-year-old Mihir arrives with a bag, hoping to join a travelling merry-go-round troupe and move from town to town. After fifteen days working at a tea stall, he has been captivated by the fair's lights and the promise of travel. The troupe's members, however, explain the realities of wages, weather, demanding schedules and the need for his family's permission. Watching the emptying ground and the labour of taking down the rides, Mihir begins to understand his desire differently. He returns home with his uncle Raghunath, but does not erase the names of distant towns from his exercise book. The longing to travel remains; what changes is the way he looks at it.

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Story 583 · Leaving the Cinema

After watching a film in Madhubani, Navneet Jha is so taken by the hero's daring escape that he imagines resigning from his job in a clothing shop and leaving for Delhi. On his journey home that night, the work of a rickshaw driver named Mahendra Sadai—repairing a broken chain and struggling with one small expense after another—shows him what travel and earning a living actually entail. Navneet does not dismiss the possibility of going to Delhi. But instead of being dazzled by the thought of buying dark glasses, he begins calculating the fare, somewhere to stay, his first month's wages and the capital he will need. In place of the film hero stands the real responsibility for his own decision.

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Story 584 · The Veranda Light

At night, Anima Jha of Darbhanga sews and alters clothes on the veranda of her home, yet seldom charges neighbours and acquaintances for their small jobs. One evening, when the bulb goes out, she becomes acutely aware of how persistently her time, thread and labour have gone unseen. After a new bulb is fitted, she charges Usha fifty rupees for work on a blouse, records her sewing income and expenses separately for the first time, and establishes working hours from three until six each day. Her daughter Ragini writes a sign for the veranda. Anima gives her labour the standing of defined work rather than treating it as an ordinary favour performed at home.

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Story 585 · The Glass at the Tea Stall

Waiting for a bus at a glass-fronted tea stall in Laheriasarai, Shruti Jha, an economics student, takes pride in the blue bag she has bought with her own earnings for eight hundred and fifty rupees. Beyond the glass, the work of Malti, who cleans drains, and her fellow labourers—their half-paid wages and uncertainty about the next day—changes what she sees. She recognises the difference between her income from tutoring, the support she receives at home and the women's difficult circumstances, without inventing a wage figure on the basis of incomplete information. When Shruti boards the bus, the bag is worth exactly what it was before; its meaning, however, is no longer confined to a story of personal achievement.

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Story 586 · The Railway Announcement

At Darbhanga Junction, seventy-two-year-old bicycle repairer Vinodnath Mahato waits for a train and watches a young man afraid of missing the train to Jamalpur. The sight recalls an opportunity in his youth, when a train taking him towards training stood before him and he could not summon the courage to board. All his life he has told his family that he missed the train, allowing later explanations to conceal the truth. Now he silently corrects the story: the train did not leave without him; he chose not to get on. As he boards his present train, an old sentence in his memory is finally set right.

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Story 587 · A Band of Sunlight

Recovering from a fever, the weaver Shivanandan Das begins measuring his days by a band of sunlight crossing his room. Under pressure to complete a trader's order for thirty gamchhas, his son Naval grows exhausted from working the loom day and night. Watching the sunlight move against marks drawn on the floor, Shivanandan senses another pace at which time may pass. When he notices the tangled warp on Naval's loom and the worn skin of his heels, he arranges a reasonable deadline with the trader instead of delivering the unfinished cloths at once. In the end, he turns away from anxious counting and continues to watch the sunlight's slow advance.

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Story 588 · A Fragment of Music

Three brief notes played by a wedding band carry sixty-four-year-old Shashikant Chaudhary back thirty years to his sister's marriage. On that occasion, an envelope of money he had put away himself went missing, and suspicion fell on Naseem, one of the musicians. Shashikant remembered where he had placed the envelope before the search was over, but chose not to speak immediately rather than face an embarrassment to his standing. Naseem's bag was searched again, and he suffered humiliation. The music heard in the present makes Shashikant recognise that the burden of those ten minutes of silence remains with him even after thirty years.

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Story 589 · The Shuttered Shop

Aniruddh Karna, a wholesale distributor of toys, looks for Lalbabu's old toy shop in the Madhubani market, a place he loved as a child. The shop has closed. Wooden spinning tops, glass marbles and toys that could be repaired have given way to a new trade in cheap plastic. Aniruddh is himself part of that business. Seeing a broken piece of a spinning toy in his warehouse, he remembers the feel of older objects and the culture of mending them. He does not give up his work, but orders the next consignment more cautiously and in a smaller quantity. The closed shutter of the old shop remains in his memory as the colours of two different times.

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Story 590 · The Eaves

Sheltering from the rain beneath an overhanging eave, Aniruddh, who prepares building plans, meets Shivcharan, a cement worker. Seeing water turn back from the edge towards the wall, Shivcharan explains that the outer slope and a drip groove have been omitted. Aniruddh recalls the assumption made in his office that a mason ought to know such small details without being told. On his next building plan, he specifies both the slope and the groove. When his senior questions the addition, Aniruddh replies that an essential detail is better put on paper. The rain reveals to him the distance between the labour of construction and the drawing that directs it.

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Story 591 · The Bicycle

After twenty-five years of travelling from village to village repairing sewing machines, Basudev Sah decides to sell his old bicycle to meet the cost of opening a permanent shop. His daughter Deepa enters an estimated value of nine hundred rupees in the accounts. At the market the bicycle sells for eight hundred and forty. In conversation with her father, Deepa learns that during the family's difficult years, repairs to the bicycle were repeatedly postponed so that more urgent expenses could be met. Basudev keeps the old jute cord with which he used to fasten his toolbox. Deepa corrects the price in her ledger and adds a sturdy chair for her father to the purchases needed for the new shop.

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Story 592 · A Glass of Water

At the Mithila Small Enterprise Conference, the speaker Aniruddh Chaudhary lectures on the importance of understanding the burdens borne by workers. Because he does not wish to hear the sound of a wheeled water trolley during his speech, the elderly attendant Raghunath Paswan must climb the stairs again and again, carrying glasses by hand. When Aniruddh sees the tremor in the man's hands, the real cost of his own instruction becomes plain. At the next session he allows the trolley's ordinary sound and adds a question to his lecture notes: who is responsible for making arrangements that share the burden of labour? A glass of water exposes the distance between principle and practice.

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Story 593 · The Procession

Near the tower in Laheriasarai, Sarita, who sells flower garlands, and her thirteen-year-old son Abhay are delighted by the extra sales brought by an election procession. Abhay is captivated by the drums, flags and glittering vehicles. After the procession passes, rain washes discarded leaflets and plastic into the drains, blocking them and flooding the ground beside the stall. Abhay clears a grating with a piece of bamboo. The following day, in his drawing class, he depicts not only the procession's crowds but also the blocked drain, the litter and the sanitation worker. His picture makes room for consequences of public celebration that otherwise go unseen.

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Story 594 · The Small Mirror

Seventy-two-year-old Harinarayan Mishra goes with his son Nachiketa to an old barber's shop for a haircut. In the little mirror he sees his ageing face beside his son's bowed head, absorbed in accounts. He recognises that he knows of his son's worries about business, whereas the son knows little of his father's lonely daily routine. He remembers, too, that he himself has earlier declined invitations to sit with his son at the shop. After the haircut, he tells Nachiketa to go on to the warehouse and decides to spend some time sitting at the shop himself. As father and son cross a muddy lane, a small act of support brings them into a new closeness.

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Story 595 · Pigeons on the Roof

Preparing for a scholarship examination, Kanak has written ‘no help from anyone’ into her daily plan and resolved to do everything alone. The flight of a flock of pigeons above the roof, help from her classmate Ruchi with practice exercises, and information from her father about the bus route lead her to reconsider what independence means. She remains determined to sit the examination on her own, but no longer mistakes useful information or the company of loved ones for weakness. On the evening before the examination, she makes time to eat with her family between periods of study. The pigeons flying together in different directions show her how independence and connection can coexist.

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Story 596 · The Hand of the Clock

Waiting for an interview at a private finance company, Apurva Jha notices a difference of one minute between the wall clock and a wristwatch repaired by his father. He remembers a saying of his father Devnarayan, a watchmaker: ‘Look at the time, but do not let the clock tell you how to live.’ In preparing for employment, Apurva has suppressed both his own interests and his skill in repairing watches. At the interview he gives up rehearsed answers and speaks instead about his genuine uncertainties and his wish to put his powers of attention to use. Whether he is selected remains unknown. On returning home, he opens a watch in his father's shop, seeking to understand the path he must choose for himself.

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Story 597 · The Last Page

While reading the final page of a novel, Rajni Chaudhary, who runs a women's sewing unit, thinks again about her mother Shail Devi's unfinished teacher training. Her mother could not pursue it because of responsibilities at home, but made sure that her daughter could study. Now Rajni has been assuming that teacher training must also be the right path for her daughter Ira, although Ira is considering work in textile conservation. Rajni prepares separate budgets for the two possibilities and resolves not to impose her own unfulfilled dream upon her daughter. Her mother's sacrifice and the autonomy of the next generation take on a different meaning for her.

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Story 598 · The First Bus of the Morning

Krishnamohan Paswan takes the first bus at dawn from Jhanjharpur to the pump-repair centre in Saharsa, hoping to earn higher wages for three months. His wife Mala does not want to prevent the journey, but she raises the question of his decision to leave without discussing it and of the costs his absence will impose on the household. Watching students and their routines at the bus stand, Krishnamohan realises that fetching water, caring for the children and the work of the home will have to be managed by others while he is away. He does not change his decision to travel to Saharsa. He does, however, recognise the need to include his family's unseen labour and the cost of their time when calculating what the higher earnings are worth.

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Story 599 · The Endless Genealogical Register

While copying a rain-damaged ancestral register at Saurath, the genealogist Vachaspati Jha finds astonishing entries containing the names of people who will live in the future. Even the name of a child soon to be born into his own family seems already fixed in its pages. His son Nachiketa and Mrinal, however, want to choose their newborn child's name themselves. Vachaspati carefully copies the line concerning the future, adding an explicit note that its date cannot be verified and that it provides no evidence on which to base a decision in the present. When asked what the child is to be called, he says that he wishes to see the child first. Between a name written down and the freedom of a life actually lived, the story leaves its tension standing.

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Story 600 · The Library of Mithila

Ishan Mishra, who is writing a book about ponds and the memory of villages, reaches a strange place in Darbhanga called ‘The Library of Mithila’. There, among possible books of written, unwritten, destroyed and uncertain sources, he is confronted with the exaggerations in his own manuscript. He has wrongly turned an uncertain recollection by the elderly Sharda Devi into a definite account of thirty days of forced labour. The next day he compares the actual records with the original interview, deletes the unsupported number, removes passages without sufficient grounding and sets out the limits of conflicting sources separately. His book may take longer to write and become thinner, but what it says will be more trustworthy.

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Story 601 · Siddha Mahavir

Widowed Anmana Didi builds a temple to Hanuman beside her small house in her parental village. For years she deprives herself of necessities to maintain the shrine, eventually deciding to sell half her land so that a concrete roof can be laid over it. Taking advantage of their kinship and her religious devotion, her nephew persuades her to sign over the land bordering the road. With the approach to her remaining plot now blocked, the temple is left unfinished. Cheated and defeated, Anmana Didi transfers the rest of her land to him as well and relinquishes her belief in divine miracles. Some years later, when the nephew dies of a heart attack, some villagers see his death as divine punishment; Anmana Didi, however, attributes it to illness and a delay in treatment. Even after her death, the temple festival continues to echo with both voices: the voice of faith and that of scientific reason.

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Story 602 · Navi Mumbai

Working in Navi Mumbai, the narrator is recognised by people from his own village as soon as they hear him speaking Maithili. This chance encounter opens onto the struggles, family ties and memories of home shared by migrant Maithils, among them Phudo Bhai and Hari Bhai. Unable to find support for a business in his village, Hari Bhai opens a sweet shop in Mumbai and prospers, yet his family remains beset by sickness and financial hardship. During the coronavirus pandemic, the hopes and precariousness of migrant life grow more acute. Hospital beds, oxygen, medicines, profiteering and untimely deaths haunt the account. Phudo Bhai recovers; Hari Bhai dies. At the end, the narrator remains confined to a life resembling imprisonment in Navi Mumbai, tormented by news from Delhi that his son's fever has not abated even on the seventh day. The story closes upon this unresolved vigil.

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Story 603 · New Delhi

On New Year's night, the narrator, working at New Delhi's magnificent airport, receives news from his village: Amar, the only son of Mohit Babu, has died in a road accident. Moving from the brightness of the airport to the darkness and deprivation across the Yamuna, the narrative reveals two opposing faces of the capital. Police procedure requires Mohit Babu to travel from his village to Delhi to claim the body. Amar's death, leaving behind a wife and a child only six weeks old, casts a shadow over the family's future. Beside the Yamuna, the rites of cremation, the father's inconsolable cries and the young widow's silent anguish merge. Behind the splendour of the modern metropolis, the insecurity of a migrant working family and the old social fate imposed upon women remain unchanged.

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Story 604 · The Abductor

Keshav, son of the poet Madhurapati, grows up playing with Malati of Jamsam village among orchards, ponds and fields. Childhood intimacy ripens into love, and their families, too, envisage a marriage. But Maharaja Bireshwar Singh of Darbhanga sends a proposal to Malati's father, Khagnath Jha. Under the pressure of royal power, Malati begins to lose control over her own life. Keshav finds the courage to take her away before the proposed marriage and marries her himself. The humiliated king orders the genealogist to append the epithet 'Taskar'—'abductor'—to Keshav's name in the genealogical register. Many years later, Keshav searches the transformed village for some trace of their love; a pond, a temple and a shaligram stone established by the king remain as witnesses to the past. The tale exposes the collision between the freedom to love, the authority of caste genealogy and royal repression.

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Story 605 · Struggle

Sohago was widowed as a child. Through hardship she educates her only son, Afel, but not long after he enters government service he dies in mysterious circumstances. Sohago believes he was murdered. Yet the shortage of witnesses and evidence in court, together with attacks upon character, allows the accused, Jatashankar, to escape conviction. Even in old age, Sohago refuses to surrender. Her struggle now concerns a wrongly recorded date of birth in the service records, an error that threatens to deprive her of five years of service entitlement. A young officer searches dusty files, gathers evidence and submits the application before his transfer. Years later he learns that Sohago's petition has been accepted. Her unyielding persistence helps the officer himself emerge from his sense of defeat.

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Story 606 · The Letter in the Letterbox

At the sight of Mutalif, a Tamil youth arrested for drug trafficking, the investigating officer suspects that someone else is the true organiser. The account unfolds of how Habibullah lured the young man into smuggling with promises of employment. The officer's inquiries lead through an intricate web of narcotics, militant organisations, secret intelligence and power. Pursuing the clues in a mysterious letter, he falls into the hands of a violent organisation; even after his release, he cannot clearly distinguish enemy from ally. Memories of an earlier accident, his son and family, and threats of armed violence emerge throughout the narrative. The death of his son shatters the officer's life. At last he stands unarmed at the organisation's hideout, waiting for Mutalif to decide his fate. The meanings of victory, defeat and liberation remain unresolved.

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Story 607 · Doma, Budhan and...

Budhan pulls a rickshaw in Chandigarh so that his younger brother, Doma, may receive an education. Even the government's free-textbook scheme fails to reach its intended beneficiaries because of the caste relations governing their village. In time Doma becomes a village teacher, while Budhan's son studies and secures a responsible position in a large business organisation. In the son's conversation with the narrator, questions arise concerning untouchability in earlier times, schooling, reservations, inter-caste marriage, the interpretation of religious scriptures and self-respect. He acknowledges what has changed, while also distinguishing caste's continued social existence from the political caste system. The aspiration for a genuine enlargement of human dignity through education and economic means carries the story beyond its ending.

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Story 608 · Suicide

After his marriage, the narrator meets the adolescent Arya at his wife's parental home. Arya's father's drinking causes conflict within the household; the family also endures social contempt and threats of eviction. Some time later the father's death is regarded as suicide, further entangling an already difficult network of family relations. News of Arya's relationship with a young man, its breakdown and then Arya's own suicide deeply disturbs the narrator. A conversation with a young man who knew her probes both the immediate circumstances of her death and the psychological and familial causes behind it. The story asks how much remains unexplained when a personal tragedy is reduced to the fault of a single person or a single event.

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Story 609 · Gandharva Letterbomb

Letra, a boy of short stature in his village, is subjected to ridicule, although he possesses an extraordinary gift for music. Under pressure of family circumstances, his father entrusts him to a theatrical company. Living there among other performers of short stature, Letra makes his way from the stage to the disciplined study of classical music. His teacher, Bhattji, recognises his talent and gives him the opportunity for rigorous training. Later, as Letterbomb, he becomes a respected teacher and artist. His experience brings into view both public discrimination and the actual needs of people of short stature. At a ceremony honouring him in old age, he demands recognition not for himself alone but for the whole community of 'Banvirs'.

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Story 610 · The Madhubani Module

Ahmed, a young man from Madhubani, comes under the influence of a militant organisation through contacts on the internet and joins a sleeper cell. As an officer questions him, memories return of the craftsmen who had repaired the officer's old home in Delhi: Nabi Baks, Okil, Sarfuddin, Khalil and their families. In particular, the struggles of Nabi Baks's widowed mother, the relationships among the brothers and the devastation wrought by floods give the account its human depth. The officer begins to realise that the present suspect's life is connected to these earlier relationships. Ahmed's statements reveal threads of online radicalisation, a clandestine organisation and planned violence. An operation is mounted on the intelligence received, and the 'Madhubani Module' is declared dismantled. Yet the closing exchange uncovers a tangled financial network behind another activity, in which even names and identities refuse to remain fixed.

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Story 611 · Shabdashastram

Mitu, a scholar of Nyaya, and Ananda, from a family of leatherworkers, fall in love. Mitu's father, Shrikar Mimamsak, is concerned with preserving ancient palm-leaf manuscripts. When he sees Ananda's intelligence and skill in conservation, he consents to their marriage despite objections based on caste. After the wedding Ananda sustains the home and family while protecting folk songs and traditions of learning; their daughters Medha and Vallabha and their son Megh grow up. When Ananda dies in old age, Mitu is engulfed by questions of memory, word, sound and illusion. Shrikar's philosophy, Mandana Mishra, Bhamati and the strains of folk song become entwined with his grief. An old incident recalled by Bachalu, together with Mitu's state of mind, moves the story between past and present. In the end Ananda's memory and voice remain alive together, and Mitu's death brings their love to a deeply moving close.

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Story 612 · The Village of the Mahisbar Brahmins

This is not the story of one person but the collective story of Garh Narikel village. From its ponds, the Kamala-Balan and Kosi rivers, embankments, wetlands, grazing grounds and landlord estates, the account moves into the life of the village community. Alongside the cattle-rearing of the Mahisbar Brahmins emerge the labour and mutual dependence of Doms, washerpeople, Dusadhs, leatherworkers, Muslims and other communities. The narrative takes a critical view of caste arrogance, untouchability, historical memory, epidemics and control over land. Folk songs, dances, sayings, rice, greens, vegetables, floods and fish bring the village's cultural geography vividly to life. Ultimately the village itself becomes a collective character, shaped by its people's speech, power, labour and means of livelihood.

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Story 613 · A Rickshaw Ride and the Fear of Robbery

At midnight in Patna, two travellers look for a rickshaw to take them to Punaichak. A rickshaw-puller refuses, fearing that on his return a robber may snatch the fare he has earned. One of the passengers jokingly declares that they themselves are the robbers. Remarkably, this contrary reply reassures the rickshaw-puller, who now agrees to take them.

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Story 614 · The Counterfeit Note

At Patna airport, a traveller has his thousand-rupee note changed so that he can pay the taxi fare. He himself is not certain whether the note is genuine. Yet the driver speaks on his behalf to the parking attendant with such confidence that the note is eventually exchanged. The traveller's misgivings and the driver's performance turn the incident into comedy.

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Story 615 · The Waterlogged Road

An officer unfamiliar with floods is posted to the Kusheshwarsthan region. Planning a journey to Ugratara Sthan, he assumes that a season without rain is the best time to travel. A local relative explains that the damaged road will now take hours, whereas when the floods arrive the same journey can be made by boat in twenty or thirty minutes. The story reveals an understanding of travel shaped by life in a waterlogged landscape.

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Story 616 · Yes, Sir

An employee has become accustomed to answering every question with 'Yes, sir.' The habit acquired in the office has taken such deep hold that even when his son asks him for something at home, 'Yes, sir' escapes his lips without thought. This little episode exposes the psychological reach of hierarchy.

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Story 617 · Two Prisoners

In prison, one inmate complains that the jailer has beaten him. Another rebukes him, taking him to be a mere thief or snatcher, but then points to a man whose welfare the jailer is respectfully enquiring after: that man stands accused of murder. The reversal exposes the strange relationship between crime and status within the prison walls.

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Story 618 · Each to His Own Luck

Members of two administrative officers' families recount the hardships of their respective postings. One officer was sent to a drought-stricken hill district, but after an earthquake the influx of relief money increased his earnings. The other was posted to a flood-prone region, only for drought to strike there. The story satirises a mentality that sees natural disaster as an opportunity for illicit profit.

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Story 619 · The Sermon

At a discourse in Delhi, a renowned swami relates a fabricated episode about Rajendra Nagar in Patna. The narrator notices that the account does not agree with the swami's supposed travels. When questioned, the swami admits that he has to tell such stories in order to obtain money from his listeners. The pretence and self-interest concealed beneath religious preaching stand exposed.

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Story 620 · The Promised Word

A matchmaker complains to Gonar Bhai that the articles promised to him have not been given. Gonar Bhai replies that in the excitement of arranging the wedding he said 'yes' to everything people suggested; he can no longer remember which objects he actually promised. The episode finds comedy in the vague assurances made during marriage negotiations and the disputes that follow.

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Story 621 · Brown Hair

A conversation among four friends turns to short caste-based names and old prejudices. One of them repeats barbs traditionally directed at different communities. Another observes that the absence of such sayings about his own caste reflects its historical backwardness, and speculates that fresh sayings may appear as its social standing improves. Their exchange reveals the politics concealed within caste humour.

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Story 622 · Self-Respect

After violating a traffic rule, a senior officer of the vigilance department attempts to bribe a constable. The havildar returns the banknote, saying that he has a reputation to uphold in his village. He lets the officer go with a warning for moving forward on an amber light, but says he would not have done so had the light been red. An ordinary public servant's self-respect teaches a memorable lesson to a man of high office.

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Story 623 · The Portrait

A friend repeatedly asks the narrator why he has had his photograph taken and why he is getting it framed. Without offering an explanation, the narrator mentions buying a garland for the photograph. His listener immediately assumes the portrait must be of the narrator's deceased father. In that single assumption, the social conventions surrounding portraits of the living and remembrance of the dead come to light.

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Story 624 · The Water Cooler

Sardar Gurmeet buys a water purifier from the old market and installs it outside his house to quench the thirst of passers-by. A few days later his mother complains that people who have been drinking alcohol come to take water and leave their disposable plastic cups behind. Along with this selfless public service comes an added burden of cleaning the household surroundings. The tale laughs gently at the unforeseen consequences of kindness.

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Story 625 · You're Not Such a Big Man Yet, Boy

Watching a cricket match, a spectator repeatedly calls out to Suresh Raina, standing on the boundary, claiming him as a friend from childhood. The player does not turn around. Later the spectator calls to a new player, Vidyut, as well. When he receives no answer from him either, he declares that Vidyut has not yet become so great a player that he can afford to ignore him. The spectator's claim of intimacy and wounded sense of importance amuse everyone.

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Story 626 · The Electrician at the Ambience Mall Campus

An electrician reputed to be highly skilled loses his employment because of his peculiar way of working. He sees nothing unusual in the danger of joining electrical wires while standing in water, but his manager fears an accident. At an interview, his answer confuses the speed of electricity with the travel time of a bus, producing a further absurdity. The story brings out the distance between claims of practical expertise and scientific understanding.

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Story 627 · A Sniffer-Dog Tale

Suspecting that a bag contains narcotics, the officers summon a trained sniffer dog. The animal tears open the bag and devours the meat inside. A havildar explains this as the consequence of corruption involving the money meant for the dog's training. In an instant, a solemn security operation becomes a satire on hunger and neglect.

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Story 628 · Traffic Rules — Part 0

In Patna, a teacher praises Delhi's well-organised traffic system, in which, he says, a vehicle driven at a specified speed can pass through a succession of green lights. When the narrator arrives in Delhi, however, he finds that the signal arrangements have changed and new restrictions are in place at the intersections. The widening distance between planning and everyday practice lies at the heart of the episode.

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Story 629 · Traffic Rules — Part 1

In Delhi, even the passenger riding pillion on a motorcycle is required to wear a helmet. The moment they cross the state border into Uttar Pradesh, the rider removes both helmets, as though the safety rule ceased to matter at the boundary. The incident reveals the geographical inconsistency of regulation and a discipline governed by personal convenience.

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Story 630 · Traffic Rules — Part 2

Travelling from Delhi to Noida, the narrator switches on his indicator before turning his car, yet narrowly avoids a collision with a bicycle. A local inspector explains that here one must not assume a driver will give way merely on seeing the indicator: the window should be opened, a hand signal made and the horn sounded as well. Local conduct on the road does not necessarily follow the formal rules of traffic.

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Story 631 · Traffic Rules — Part 3

The narrator leaves his car in a prohibited place at the roadside for no more than a minute. When he returns, it has vanished. A constable tells him that if a thief has taken it, no one can say where it might be; if the traffic police have towed it away, however, it will be at the police station. Finding the car there, the narrator feels positively blessed. At least it was not a thief who had taken it.

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Story 632 · The Caste-Prejudiced Marathi

In Pune, a Marathi man wonders aloud what sort of people the inhabitants of Mithila and Bihar can be: some become officers, while others pull rickshaws or work as cooks. Singh Sahib sees no contradiction between his own government post and his brother's modest job at a printing press. Beneath the question, the narrator recognises the caste and class prejudices directed against migrant labour.

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Story 633 · The Hard-Hearted Human

A bird's mate no longer stays in the place they shared. For two days the bird sits there desolate; at last it, too, flies away. The narrator's grandmother contrasts this creature's grief with the conduct of human beings. Even after the death of a loved one or the breaking of a relationship, people mourn for a few days and then resume their ordinary lives. In the sharp comparison between the bird's feeling and human 'hard-heartedness' lies the story's bitter irony.

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Story 634 · Polygamy and the Eunuch

A man's third wife dies. Village conversations turn to his decision to marry a third time after the first two marriages had produced no children. The man lays the blame upon his third wife, but the villagers make cutting remarks about his own virility. The satire falls upon the cruelty of polygamy and upon a society that holds women alone responsible for childlessness.

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Story 635 · Women and Daughters

Little Buchiya wants to eat beside her father, but her mother makes her sit apart. By the time her father and brothers have eaten the better vegetables and drunk the milk, only the leftovers remain for Buchiya and her mother. From this memory the conversation widens to the old discrimination against women and daughters—in food, education and the respect accorded to them.

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Story 636 · Marriage and the Touching of Feet

At his daughter's wedding, a father gives her wealth and property and then bends to touch his visiting son-in-law's feet in greeting. The son-in-law insists that he will accept no customary gift for this gesture of respect. The father-in-law nevertheless places a one-rupee coin beside a hundred-rupee note and recalls the beliefs of his own generation. In this small exchange, the affection carried by an old custom meets the changing relationship between generations.

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Story 637 · Talent

During training for the administrative service, a newly selected officer takes his success as proof of extraordinary intelligence. A fellow trainee reminds him of his poor performance at school and the relentless drilling of model questions that preceded his selection. Success is no small achievement; yet the story questions the easy assumption that skill in preparing for a competitive examination is the same thing as inborn talent.

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Story 638 · Caste and Rank

At a drinking party during police training, an officer asserts his Rajput identity with swagger. Another trainee reminds him that they hold the same rank; yet he cannot beat his chest and proclaim his own Dom caste in the same fashion. Their contrast lays bare the unequal social licence granted to different kinds of caste pride.

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Story 639 · A Job on Compassionate Grounds

The gifted elder son of a freedom fighter dies of an incurable disease. His father, worn down by caring for him, is shattered by the loss. The younger son, eager to secure employment, receives his dead brother's educational certificates from their father. Using the brother's identity, he obtains a job at a company in Calcutta. What is ordinarily understood by employment on compassionate grounds acquires a strange and unsettling reversal.

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Story 640 · Recommendations, Messages and the Officer

A relative of an honest superintendent of police asks him to use his influence to secure admission to teacher training for two daughters-in-law. The officer refuses to put improper pressure on another department. When the relative persists, he replies with deliberate irony: let a bomb go off at the college gate; then the principal will come to the police, and there will be an opportunity to talk. The entreaties cease at once.

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Story 641 · The New Media

After a robbery in the city, news outlets declare the police incompetent because no arrest has been made immediately. Under pressure, the police seize a man and beat him until he confesses. But he cannot name the three supposed accomplices: he had taken no part in the robbery. Sensational reporting and the police's need to make a show of action have displaced the search for truth.

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Story 642 · Industry in Mithila

Chaudharyji, an influential man in his village, sets up a passenger-bus service. The authority he commands at home counts for nothing against a rival proprietor at the town bus stand. The driver and conductor are beaten, the service closes, and the bus is left standing beside a temple. Before long, a creeper of white gourds has climbed over it. That abandoned vehicle becomes an image of the muscle power, monopolies and absence of industry that frustrate enterprise in the region.

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Story 643 · Flood, Hunger and Migration — Hunger (1)

Pappu Bhai has eaten his fill of meat and rice at a wedding feast. Yet he announces that he will attend no more weddings: there is never anything to eat at them, he complains. Looking at the heap of bones before him, the narrator can barely restrain his laughter. The contradiction between an enormous appetite and a grievance about hunger supplies the joke.

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Story 644 · Flood, Hunger and Migration — Hunger (2)

Pappu Bhai visits his sister, hoping for milk from her recently calved buffalo. In the warmth of their conversation she forgets to serve him any. So Pappu Bhai invents a story about an extraordinarily long snake he has seen, stretching as far as the cooking hearth. His sister's attention turns at once to the milk boiling there. His artful hint has worked.

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Story 645 · Flood, Hunger and Migration — The Flood

A flood on the Kosi leaves sand upon the fields. With other food in short supply, Pappu Bhai must eat sweet potatoes again and again. Just then a letter comes from his nephew in Haridwar, describing the rice pudding and puris served after Vedic recitation. Drawn by the prospect of a more delicious meal, Pappu Bhai resolves to migrate.

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Story 646 · Flood, Hunger and Migration — A Blow in Exile

Arriving in Haridwar, Pappu Bhai joins in the Vedic recitation and looks forward to the evening's rice pudding and puris. But the priests, already weary of eating that meal, have changed the arrangement: henceforth they will be served sweet potatoes and milk. Before Pappu Bhai, who had fled the privations of his village, stands the very sweet potato he had hoped to escape. Migration delivers its own tragic joke.

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Story 647 · The New Feudal Lord

A quarrelsome young man from the village continues to threaten to shoot everyone even after moving to Delhi. When he demands that someone travel twenty or forty kilometres to him in ten minutes, the impossibility of his demand is pointed out. Having failed to complete even a basic education, he has abandoned a job because he considers it beneath his 'status'. The story exposes the emptiness of his swagger and his contempt for work.

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Story 648 · Fourth Place

A wrestler from a city akhara enters a half-marathon. Along the route two young men spur him on by telling him he is running fourth. The lure of a medal drives him far beyond his strength, and he crosses the finish line almost unconscious. When he hears the official result—eighth place—he realises he has been tricked. The tale turns on the irony of enticing someone with fourth place in order to wring the last measure of effort from him.

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Story 649 · The Vote

Seven candidates from a large village contest the election for head of the Garh Narikel panchayat, while the neighbouring small village fields only one. Fearing defeat, the people of the larger village devise a plan to choose a single candidate by an internal vote. One contestant, however, frightens a retired teacher with warnings about the election code of conduct, and the arrangement collapses. All seven remain in the contest, increasing the small village's chances of victory.

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Story 650 · Masuai

In the village, the customary eating of hare and other kinds of meat becomes contentious in a school setting. A small boy says he wants to take the school's pet rabbit home, cook it as masuai and eat it. His teacher sees cruelty in the wish and worries about the child's upbringing. His father explains the cultural differences in people's food habits, but her anxiety is not dispelled.

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Story 651 · The Siberian Camp

A Sikh shopkeeper, displaced from Afghanistan and later naturalised as a German citizen, runs a business in Siberia. Seeing that several of his fingers are missing, someone assumes a connection with the history of Siberian camps. The trader points out that people conduct business there too. In the extreme cold, a drunken person who takes off his gloves can suffer such severe frostbite that his fingers must be amputated. The story sets second-hand assumptions against lived experience.

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Story 652 · Meet Bhai Series — 1. Chansagar

When visitors come to consider a marriage alliance for Meet Bhai, the matchmaker praises his abundance of land and grain. The whole embankment, he declares, belongs to Meet Bhai. The visitors notice ridges dividing the fields and begin to ask questions; the matchmaker deftly invokes floodwater and the slope of the land to explain them away. His nimble words reveal the art of embellishment in the marriage market.

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Story 653 · Meet Bhai Series — 2. Complexion

People have much to say about Meet Bhai's very dark complexion. After his marriage, someone asks what his wife looks like. Meet Bhai compares her beauty to that of a celebrated actress, but adds that her complexion is darker still than his own. The brief comic exchange turns on the difference between a person's appearance and society's received ideas of beauty.

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Story 654 · Meet Bhai Series — 3. Selection

A man cannot understand how a country as large as India can lose at sport to much smaller countries. Meet Bhai gives a simple reply: in cricket or football, the entire population does not take the field; only the selected number of players does. In one answer he distinguishes the size of a nation from the skill of the players chosen to represent it.

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Story 655 · Meet Bhai Series — 4. The Thieves’ Market

The lure of valuable shoes at bargain prices takes Meet Bhai to Delhi's thieves' market. A seller convinces him he is buying something precious and relieves him of almost all his money. Within four days the soles have come away. Recounting how he was cheated, Meet Bhai declares with delicious irony that the market's swindlers are extraordinarily clever people, worthy of the highest respect.

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Story 656 · Meet Bhai Series — 5. Teaching

Meet Bhai says that he steadily saves money from his schoolteacher's salary and the income from his fields. Yet when he approaches families to arrange a marriage for a daughter, they refuse to believe he has the means. His indignation arises from a social prejudice that discounts a teacher's earnings even when he possesses accumulated savings.

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Story 657 · Meet Bhai Series — 6. The Pasiij Thorn

Meet Bhai uses the juice of the pasiij thorn to kill fish in a pond, but unwittingly recommends the same juice as a drink for a sick child. A warning arrives in time, and the child is saved. Filled with remorse, Meet Bhai takes a religious neck-bead; he does not, however, stop eating fish. His peculiar distinction between killing fish and eating them gives the episode its humour.

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Story 658 · Meet Bhai Series — 7. The Telephone Directory

Gonar Jha is looking through a notebook in which he has written the telephone numbers of many people. Meet Bhai suggests that if the police saw so many numbers, they might take him for a terrorist. Frightened, Gonar Jha immediately tears up the useful notebook and throws it away. An imaginary danger has caused a very real loss.

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Story 659 · Meet Bhai Series — 8. Clearing Dung

On his way towards the pond, Meet Bhai sees Jagannath clearing away dung. He says nothing in the presence of Jagannath's wife, but later, when they are alone, raises the subjects of marriage and money. He says he paid nothing to marry his own wife, and she is not so demanding; therefore he is under no compulsion to clear dung. His remark turns the distribution of domestic labour into a social joke.

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Story 660 · Meet Bhai Series — 9. The Greater Reward

Bachcha Babu, exceptionally careful with his money, extols the virtues of tea made with jaggery or lemon in an effort to reduce expenses. Meet Bhai declares that at a pilgrimage site he made a vow to give up sugarcane, and insists upon tea made with milk. Bachcha Babu has to pay for it. The comedy lies in the clever defeat of miserliness.

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Story 661 · Meet Bhai Series — 10. Meet Bhai’s Son

Meet Bhai’s son leaves home, and Meet Bhai sets out for Delhi, hoping both to find the boy and to look for employment. On the train he becomes embroiled in a quarrel with a fellow passenger. The police then mistake a bidi made with khesari for cannabis and take away most of his money. When at last he reaches Delhi, he learns that his son has already returned home. With the search over and his hopes of a job abandoned, Meet Bhai decides to go back to the village. His journey has cost him dearly, and achieved almost nothing.

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Story 662 · Meet Bhai Series — 11. The Indian Administrative Service

Meet Bhai boasts of his intimate acquaintance with the district collector, repeatedly referring to him as “Bha. Pra. Se. Prashant.” Someone explains that Bha. Pra. Se. is not part of the man’s name: it is the abbreviation for the Indian Administrative Service. Meet Bhai’s display of familiarity dissolves at once into a misunderstanding. The comedy turns on the distance between the outward glamour of an official designation and any real knowledge of what it means.

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Story 663 · Meet Bhai Series — 12. The Rumour of Mahadev Drinking Milk

Meet Bhai tells a story about three dogs who go to a sweet-seller's shop. Although they are beaten there, each conceals the humiliation and boasts that he was received with great hospitality. Meet Bhai compares their behaviour to the rumour that a Shiva linga has drunk milk. Even after seeing evidence to the contrary for himself, he cannot muster the courage to deny the miracle when others ask about it. The tale reveals how a falsehood travels: shame first disguises an experience, and the pressure of the crowd then makes honest testimony seem impossible.

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Story 664 · Bihari

During a discussion about having the office premises cleaned, an employee proposes calling in “four Bihari” labourers. The narrator replies that three will do: he himself is the fourth Bihari. The exchange turns a casual expression back upon the speaker. In a single retort, it exposes the habit of using “Bihari” as if the word meant nothing more than a manual labourer.

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Story 665 · Fielding

A man explains why he has given up cricket. He was always made to field, he says, and whenever he finally got the chance to bat, he was out almost at once. The narrator reminds him that fielding and bowling are no less important than batting. The man's disappointment is real enough, but his complaint betrays a narrower view of the game: for him, to play cricket is scarcely to play at all unless he can stand at the crease with a bat.

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Story 666 · Skill

An employee is praised for completing a technical procedure with remarkable speed. Yet he is dissatisfied. Everyone else, he complains, is regarded as hardworking, while he is thought to be forever occupied with his mobile phone. The very proficiency that allows him to finish a task in less time makes his labour disappear from view. The irony lies in judging effort by the hours it seems to consume rather than by the knowledge and skill with which the work is done.

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Story 667 · Discipline

One colleague is astonished that another never shows anger, however harshly the boss abuses him. Does he truly feel nothing? Of course he feels angry, the man replies; he curses the boss roundly—only in his mind. The outward calm that passes for discipline conceals an unbroken inward rebellion. Between the obedient face and the furious thoughts lies the joke.

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Story 668 · Science — 1. Science Education

On the last day of school, students write messages of remembrance on one another's shirts. The shirt belonging to the narrator's son, a science student, remains blank. The boy explains this as the seriousness expected of the science stream. His father sees something else in the empty fabric: a want of youthful excitement and the weight of mental pressure. The incident suggests an imbalance between an education devoted to achievement and the spontaneous fellowship of adolescence.

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Story 669 · Science — 2. Chemistry

A graduate in chemistry is caught stealing. The villagers decide to put the milky sap of the aak plant into his eyes. Trusting his scientific knowledge, the thief says that karu oil would damage the eyes. His words have precisely the opposite of the intended effect: the villagers apply that oil as well. One eye is destroyed, though the other survives. The episode turns violent superstition and half-understood knowledge into a grim, unsettling irony.

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Story 670 · Science — 3. Physics

A graduate in physics is caught travelling without a ticket. While fleeing, he loses a slipper in a field but carries the other away in his hand. Later, he returns and retrieves the first one as well. The villagers reason that had he abandoned both slippers in the field, someone might have taken the second too. This explanation, hailed as an example of scientific thinking, awakens a fresh enthusiasm for the study of science in the village. Its humour depends upon the peculiar logic through which an ordinary incident is elevated into a lesson in physics.

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Ijot — Janam-Janamak Katha

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Story 671 · The Thief of the Genealogical Register

While preserving an old genealogical register, Niranjan discovers an entry deliberately scraped away in the Udayanpur branch. Shivkant's uneasy silence, a letter from Harinarayan and Subhadra's spoken recollections point towards Mahesar, a man who has been made to vanish from family memory. Subhadra also brings a torn sheet of paper, but there is not enough evidence to treat it as an authenticated part of the original register. Niranjan records the fact of the erased entry without inventing a name as certainty; he refuses to mistake possibility for proof. What emerges is the violence by which a human being can be expunged from the history of a lineage. In the end, the thief proves to be more than any one person. Collective silence, too, steals from memory.

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Story 672 · The House Seen Again

After the death of Barki Kaki, Madhavi returns to her village home for the first time in thirty years. The altered courtyard, a shuttered room and a smoke stain left by her mother’s lamp draw her towards her childhood. During her struggle to leave home for an education, she had believed her mother to be merely passive. Now, fragments of family conversation and the uneasy movement of memory suggest that her mother’s silence may have concealed a measure of support. Her brother Ashok raises the question of the house’s future, including the possibility of selling it. At daybreak Madhavi looks at the building from outside and discovers a new meaning in something her mother once said: one cannot understand everyone’s place while remaining within the house. She leaves without a final decision, but she no longer sees either the home or her mother as she did before.

Story 673 · In a Free State

The lives of migrant workers unfold through scenes from different cities. In a Delhi hospital, Binod works as a night watchman. Distance has freed him from the old questions of caste and lineage, yet exhaustion and the insecurity of migrant life still hold him fast. The cramped rooms of other workers, their wages, the money sent home and their endlessly deferred plans to return reveal the actual cost of being away. In Kolkata, Kiran considers how to arrange further schooling for her daughter Sonam. At a factory, Naresh is caught between the ticket that would take him home, an advance he owes and the demands of his work. A message that little Komal will be waiting at the station in her red frock sharpens his conflict. The story’s “free state” becomes an irony: freedom from some inherited restraints coexists with economic dependence and a liberty that remains unfinished.

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Story 674 · Water Burial

Malati's husband, Subodh, has disappeared. His bicycle was found by the river, but no body has been recovered. The family wishes to regard him as drowned; Malati must live with what is not known. In an old family register she finds the words "taken by the water" beside Chandrakala's name. Her enquiries suggest that Chandrakala did not drown at all, but may have been sent away from the household. Through her mother-in-law's experience, Malati comes to understand how a family can name a woman's absence a "water burial" and so preserve its public reputation. Amid the sounds of the river and her own fear, Malati walks down to the ghat. Instead of entering the water, however, she boards a bus for her mother's home. She refuses to leave the meaning of her life in the hands of a verdict written by others.

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Story 675 · Outside the Caste

The woman who narrates this story belongs to a family whose name is missing from the prestigious genealogical register. One day the search for a scraped-out entry reaches her courtyard. Nilabh's investigation finds traces of an ancestress named Dharani, whose life had been reduced in the official account to a disputed relationship with a high-caste household. The narrator gathers other memories: Dharani's labour, her skill in weaving winnowing trays, the children she rescued during a flood and the songs she sang. She will not promote a conjecture into evidence, and she records the limits of her own family's oral tradition as carefully as its riches. Finally, in a notebook entitled “People”, she writes down the names of those whom the narrow boundaries of lineage excluded. Dharani ceases to be merely an erased entry; the memory of an entire life begins to take shape.

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Story 676 · The Reckoning of the Bed

On her first night of marriage, Sonmati discovers that even on the bed there is not quite enough room for her. Her husband Mohan’s request to “move over a little” becomes, over time, a measure of the labour expected of women, the claims of relatives and the shrinking space allowed to a private self. Sonmati begins recording the small concessions and large surrenders of the bed in her notebook. Later she makes room for the new daughter-in-law, Rina, determined not to repeat what was done to her. When she willingly gives her bed to her ailing father-in-law, she understands the difference between space that is seized and space that is offered in love. After Mohan’s death she has the whole bed, but its emptiness brings no simple contentment. At last she moves over for her granddaughter Ananya of her own accord. This time the account records not merely sacrifice but her freedom to choose it.

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Story 677 · A Second Marriage

The family and the village discuss a second marriage for the widowed Padma, but her own voice is heard last of all. Her daughter Trisha's education, the property of her first husband's family, the care of her mother-in-law Bhavani Devi and the expectations of Chandrakant's household exert different pressures upon her. Meanwhile Padma expands her sewing work and gives employment to two young women. At a formal meeting everyone explains her future according to their own needs. Padma lays out her sewing accounts, the receipts for Trisha's schooling and the record of her mother-in-law's medicines: the documents of the life whose responsibilities she actually bears. For the first time Chandrakant asks her directly what she wants. Padma agrees to marry, but refuses the condition that she must leave her home.

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Story 678 · The Metre of a Ghazal

Nasima Bi's life stretches from her apprenticeship under Ustad Karim Bakhsh through musical gatherings, recordings, commercial pressures and the demands of another generation. As she learns the metre and refrain of the ghazal, she also learns that the same verse may acquire a different meaning at different moments of a life. She resists attempts to shorten her professional name, cut a couplet or present only a convenient fragment of an artist's history. Her daughter Saba's social hesitation and the aspirations of younger disciples bring fresh struggles. At a small gathering in Nasima's old age, Rukhsana takes up a ghazal, and Nasima teaches the next generation to distinguish a rule of art from a fetter. The inheritance of a voice, the story suggests, is not fixed repetition; it is a living succession of changing experience.

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Story 679 · The Guest Room

Returning from abroad after her father's death, Anamika spends the night with her mother in the guest room of their old house. For years she has read that room as a sign that she had been set apart from her own home. Their conversation reveals that her mother's secret support had been decisive in Anamika's struggle to study away from the village, and that the guest room had been chosen so she could rest. Mother and daughter had given different meanings to the same gesture. Anamika begins to think of her own habit of placing her daughter Ira in a separate room without first asking her wishes. The distance between generations begins to lessen when she recognises the importance of asking rather than announcing a decision. The room itself does not change; the eyes with which she sees it do.

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Story 680 · Mist

After many years away, Binod leaves his job in Delhi and returns to the village. The mist-covered road, the changed pond and newly built houses expose the distance between his remembered home and the present one. At the village records centre he meets Niranjan, and they speak of erased names, incomplete evidence and the stories people tell. Binod comes to see that even a fully completed identity card cannot contain a human life. At home, Renu asks whether his years of migration have truly ended. He fills a flowerpot with village earth and places an old nameplate from the hospital by the window, yet makes no grand promise that he will remain. The mist does not entirely lift. The house is visible nevertheless, and he chooses to face life one day at a time rather than merely count the days.

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Story 681 · The Limits of Justice

The life of Ratneshwar Jha, a scholar of Navya-Nyaya, changes with the death of his grandson Anay in a road accident. Investigating what happened, Ratneshwar insists on separating what was directly observed from what can only be inferred. But in the presence of his daughter Mrinal's grief, the limits of his philosophical language are laid bare. His precision is valuable in examining documents, evidence and legal procedures; no argument, however, can undo the child's absence. Mrinal asks not for a doctrine but for her father to sit beside her. When Ratneshwar returns to the university, he continues to teach the boundaries of knowledge, though now he acknowledges the questions that cannot be brought to completion. A blank annotation in his manuscript no longer appears a defect. It has become a mark of the limits of human experience.

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Story 682 · The Letter

Saraswati Devi writes to her granddaughter Ira in the old Maithilakshar script, which Ira cannot read. The letter holds her grandmother's intimate thoughts on the mother tongue, writing, the distance between generations, the courage to speak and the meaning of remembrance. She does not command Ira to preserve a language; she asks only for the time it would take to learn one letter. After Saraswati Devi's death, Ira finds the letter tucked inside a notebook. As her aunt reads it aloud, Ira listens closely instead of trying to capture the voice in a device. In the blank line at the end she writes, in Devanagari, that tomorrow she will learn the first letter. The old script and the new handwriting share one page, opening the possibility of a conversation between generations.

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Story 683 · The Register’s Final Entry

Ishan, grandson of the genealogist Harinarayan, is asked to establish the truth of an entry in an old family register during a land dispute. It calls Vimal the son of Durganand and Kamala. Family petitions, documents from the village elders and other testimony reveal a more complicated history: Vimal was born to Kamala’s sister, but Durganand and Kamala had raised him as their own. The affection of a family, rights of inheritance and an entry added at a later date cannot simply be treated as the same kind of fact. Ishan does not erase the line written by his grandfather. Instead, he adds a new note setting out when it was written, what it was meant to express and where its authority ends. The decision over ownership of the land is left to a separate proceeding. The register now preserves both the grandfather’s error and the grandson’s responsibility in recording it.

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Story 684 · Twins

While his mother undergoes surgery, Amitesh notices an unusual discrepancy between his own blood group and those of his parents. The doctor warns him against drawing a hasty conclusion. In his search through old hospital records, Amitesh meets Raghav Mandal, who was born on the same date. Evidence gathered by the two families strengthens the possibility that the babies were exchanged at birth. Yet the implications reach far beyond biology: thirty years of upbringing, language, work and affection are also at stake. Neither family suddenly overturns its life or repudiates the parents who brought up the children. Amitesh and Raghav come to understand that an accidental exchange at birth does not render the lives they have lived false. Family bonds emerge as something larger than what a blood test alone can establish.

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Story 685 · Kinsfolk

To Ayan, raised in Doha, the village in Mithila entered in his school form under “permanent address” seems an unfamiliar kind of belonging. After the death of his grandfather Umakant, his father Pranav needs the testimony of relatives and an official family tree to have the ancestral house transferred into the family’s name. A land dispute, the reluctance of kinsmen, different recollections on the father’s and mother’s sides, and a reversed digit in an official entry all resist the making of a single straight family history. When the formalities are complete, Ayan realises that a name on a certificate and a bond of affection are not identical things. Subhadra Kaki, quarrelsome Jagdish Kaka and his mother all have a place in the story of who he is. On the journey back to Doha, he reconsiders the meaning of a permanent address: home is also wherever people remember him without the aid of a form.

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Story 686 · The Hidden Branch

Newly married Kirti finds old letters and photographs in a locked box beneath the staircase of her husband’s family home. The papers mention Manjari, Sudha and Deepak, suggesting a branch of the family long kept out of conversation. Kirti and other relatives read the documents in sequence, resisting the urge to force a quick meaning upon every unfinished line and respecting the privacy of those involved. When it becomes possible to reach Deepak, they write to propose contact, leaving him free to decide whether to reply. A conversation with the forgotten branch eventually begins, though the distance of years is not dissolved at once. The letters are preserved with blank pages between them, so that the next generation may write its own account.

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Story 687 · Adoption

The upbringing and parentage of Abhinav, in the families of the brothers Shambhunath and Ramanath, become the subject of a property dispute. After losing their own child, Shambhunath and Gauri had raised Abhinav as a son. Following the death of Arvind, Ramanath's son, old decisions are reopened in anger. In court, records from school, marriage ceremonies, hospitals and the family register attest to years of acceptance, but the social recognition of kinship and legal ownership of land prove to be distinct questions. Mediation and conversation gradually ease the dispute. Abhinav refuses to reject either of his two fathers or either of his two mothers. At the end both relationships are recorded beside his name, and their shared history is acknowledged as larger than a division of property.

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Story 688 · Beyond Caste

Chandan Jha and Nilima Paswan remove the caste-marking surname from their daughter Ira's name. The decision raises questions about grandfather Bhaveshwar's understanding of lineage and the obscured history of Nilima's maternal family. Nilima prepares a notebook entitled "Our People" for the child, gathering the people, work, songs, photographs and known or unknown dates of both families. The scant place allotted to daughters and maternal descent in the old genealogical register lays bare the inequalities within kinship itself. Growing up, Ira questions her grandparents, learns the limits of the evidence available and imagines a family that need not be enclosed by inherited categories. For a school assignment she writes her name as "Ira Nilima-Chandan", leaving room for relationships yet to come. Lineage becomes an open succession of belonging, not a circle sealed at birth.

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Story 689 · The Diary

After the death of the genealogist Devkinandan, his granddaughter Mrinalini discovers a notebook called “Household Accounts”. It is, in fact, a private diary. Behind the reputation of an impartial keeper of registers she finds a tangled history: Bhagwati Devi’s struggle over rights to her homestead, transactions in paddy and her grandfather’s own doubts. Mrinalini refuses to accept private handwriting as the final truth. She compares it with court records, other accounts and spoken testimony. Some details can be established; others remain possibilities. A copy of the diary is placed in the public library with its context made clear, alongside a separate account of Bhagwati’s struggle. The story shows that the hand which makes a record is never entirely free from the loyalties and limitations of its time.

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Story 690 · A False Lineage

When a marriage is proposed for his son Nawal, Rambilas Mandal is asked to produce a family tree extending back seven generations. Embarrassed that he does not know all his ancestors’ names, he commissions a handsome computer-generated genealogy. It presents the unverified Janakinath as an ancestor. But the document brings more than prestige to the proposed wedding: it also provokes a claim over land from other relatives. Nawal refuses to marry on the strength of a falsehood, and the family slowly makes a public correction. Enquiries reveal that “Janakinath” was the name of a landmark, not an authenticated forefather. In the end Nawal marries with a plain account of the parents and ancestors actually known to him. Rambilas begins to see that leaving the unknown names blank is not a disgrace but a duty to the truth.

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Story 691 · Roots in a Foreign Land

After his father Shailesh dies in Toronto, Arnav, born in Canada, comes to Mithila in search of his father's village, Kusumpur. He brings an old key, photographs, an incomplete address and a short recording of his father speaking Maithili. From Kunti Devi in the village he hears things about Shailesh's childhood that no genealogical register has recorded. Arnav comes to understand that searching for his father's roots and deciding what place those roots will have in his own life are two different matters. His mother, Meera, illuminates the distinction through the languages she and her husband exchanged during their married life. Arnav leaves his daughter Leena free to regard Kusumpur as one of the places to which her family belongs. Even amid incomplete evidence, the feeling of kinship endures.

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Story 692 · The Priesthood

After the death of Rudranath Jha, both his sons, Shivnath and Vidyanath, are proposed for the priesthood of the village shrine of Madhukanteshwar. The elder brother, Shivnath, has conducted its daily worship for years. The younger is more learned in the scriptures, but has only a limited ability to remain in the village regularly. As the committee begins selecting a successor, old sacrifices and grievances within the family come to light. A note left by their father describes the priesthood not as a hereditary office but as service and guardianship. Instead of declaring a single victor, the family finds a way to share worship, administration, training and upkeep. Not every disagreement between the brothers disappears, yet the shrine’s continuously burning lamp reminds them of the value of a responsibility borne together.

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Story 693 · A Lineage of Melodies

Kiran and Aditya, pupils of the elderly singer Madhaveshwar Jha, hold different views of who should inherit his world of music. Kiran sustains the oral tradition and the living rhythms of performance; Aditya preserves recordings, musical notation and the histories of their sources. Playing an old reel of an unidentified woman singer, their teacher tells them that a name which cannot be established must not be supplied by conjecture. After his death the two pupils discover new ways to work together, joining preservation with performance. In the singing of the young Sakshi they hear the voice of her grandmother Chandrakala, and recognise the need to record her name. The story portrays a lineage of ragini not as a straight line of masters and disciples, but as an open network formed by many people’s voices, labour, memories and transformations.

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Story 694 · The Maternal Line

For four generations the key to the ancestral house has passed from mother to daughter. Now Grandmother Urmila Devi wishes to give it to her granddaughter Ishani. Ishani appreciates a tradition that has kept women’s names alive, but objects to placing the compulsory burden of maintaining the house on the eldest daughter. An old ledger records the achievements of the maternal line, along with opportunities for education, training and independent lives that its women were denied. Riddhi proposes opening the house for collective use by craftworkers, while the men of the family confront questions about their own share of responsibility. Ultimately, exclusive possession of the key gives way to an arrangement based on shared access and consent. As Ishani leaves home she accepts a duplicate key; it now signifies not a command, but the freedom to return if she chooses.

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Story 695 · Evidence

When Saraswati Devi's silver hansuli necklace disappears, the villagers immediately brand the poor man Ramjit a thief. Uma Devi, the village head, begins examining the grounds of the accusation, separating what has actually been seen, what has been heard, inference and prejudice already formed. The necklace is certainly missing, but the lock, the key and the statements of those present do not establish Ramjit's guilt. Later it is found in the lamp room of the goddess's shrine, though who left it there remains unknown. Saraswati Devi visits Ramjit's mother, opening a small possibility of dialogue between the families. Uma Devi records both the event and the uncertainty that survives it. The story exposes the limits of evidence and the injustice inflicted by collective prejudice.

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Story 696 · Maya

Harinarayan Jha receives partial compensation for an investment fraud committed eleven years earlier. He recounts the experience to his granddaughter Anvi: a glittering office, early gains deposited in the bank, the trust of acquaintances and the temptation to recruit new investors combined to draw him into deception. At the time he had ignored his wife Sushila's question, "Where is the money coming from?" When the company closed, the family suffered financially and socially. Yet, in preparing his complaint, Harinarayan refuses to invent facts he does not know about the roles of the accused. He tells Anvi that something seen may be real in its own place, while a mistaken interpretation of it may become maya, an illusion. The actual flame of a lamp and its reflection in glass give visible form to that difference.

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Story 697 · Rasa

The director Udaykant and the actress Madhavi rehearse a play about a mother searching for her daughter, who has gone missing in a flood. Udaykant explains the scene through the classical elements of karuna rasa, the aesthetic experience of sorrow. Madhavi, however, believes that a character’s experience cannot be contained entirely within predetermined rules. During rehearsal, questions arise about private memory, the craft of acting and the different responses of spectators. An elderly woman watching the scene feels not merely compassion but anger towards the authorities who have stopped searching. The response teaches both artists that the same performance does not evoke an identical rasa in everyone. At last the blackboard bears, beside the word “karuna”, two questions: “Within whom?” and “With whom?” The debate between art and experience remains open, while both acknowledge the limits of their perspectives.

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Story 698 · Destiny

Shashibhushan Jha repeatedly blames destiny for the money he has lost gambling. His wife Lalita keeps a ledger of the household's financial losses, recording the actual consequences of his choices. Debt, lies, brief spells of reform and renewed wagers wound the family's trust. Events such as his mother's accident and damage caused by heavy rain compel Shashibhushan to consider that not every suffering arises from personal choice, but that blaming everything on fate is equally unjustified. Gradually he repays his debts and accepts responsibility for his bets. Even so, the hurt sustained by his daughter Ragini's trust, and his son Nandan's fear of spending money, do not vanish at once. In the end he writes down the difference between destiny and his own decisions, without claiming to have attained complete deliverance.

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Story 699 · The Word as Brahman

After the death of his younger brother, the elderly poet Vinaykant Mishra is so troubled by the inadequacy of words that he stops writing. Words such as “simple man”, “water” and “good” seem incapable of expressing the whole truth of a person or an experience. His wife Janaki’s everyday conversations—about lentils burning, recognising a cup, or telling their daughter about someone’s health—show him that language does not say everything at once: people ask questions and carry meaning further. Listening to readings of older poetry, he re-examines his former convictions. Eventually he accepts empty spaces in his new writing, understanding that being limited is not the same as being worthless. The possibility of writing again opens before him, although he finds no final resolution to his doubts.

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Story 700 · Impermanence

Sudha Devi’s old house has become unsafe and is being demolished to make way for a new one. Every blow of the hammer returns her to memories of marriage, children, death and the daily labour of a lifetime. Her son Madhukant and granddaughter Mrinal preserve traces of the old house, but Sudha Devi does not insist that every brick or the old tulsi platform be saved. What can still be used is put to use again; what has broken is left among the rubble. Living in the new house, she knows that the pain of change is real, yet that pain cannot be allowed to suspend the life before her. She tells her granddaughter to live before turning life into a memory. The light moving across the new courtyard becomes a quiet experience of impermanence.

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Story 701 · Self and Non-Self

The actor Aniruddha becomes so immersed in playing an elderly character named Damodar that he carries the man’s gait, breathing and silences into his own home. His wife Arya notices how rehearsing the role has begun to alter his ordinary behaviour. The director Shekhar and a senior actress teach him not only how to enter a character’s world but also how to step out of it. Aniruddha understands that an artist’s private memories enter the work of acting, yet the character and the person are not one and the same. Even after the play ends, some of the character’s habits linger in his memory; he no longer regards this as a cause for fear. A question from his daughter Tara makes him reflect on the meaning of the “I” that changes with time. The wavering shadow of a lamp remains a question posed to any claim of a fixed identity of the self.

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Story 702 · Cause and Effect

Amid rain and erosion along a drainage channel, an old culvert in Pipra collapses. A goods vehicle crashes, people are injured, and Ramsakhi Devi dies. At first the villagers variously blame the driver's error, the rain, the workings of karma or the administration. A technical inquiry identifies combined causes: weak foundations, erosion of the soil, old cracks and the failure to carry out inspections in time. Some accusations cannot be substantiated. The panchayat records the incident, the losses and the findings separately, and makes provision for inspecting the new culvert as it is built. Voices also rise against reducing Ramsakhi Devi to a statistic of the accident. The story shows that the failure to discover the whole meaning of suffering does not make the search for its causes futile.

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Story 703 · Silence

Harinath Jha undertakes a thirty-day vow of silence in the hope of listening more attentively. His disciple Sadanand treats that silence as a spiritual sign and begins interpreting it for the public. The family's distress, Parvati's practical questions and the growing publicity around the ashram reveal that silence can sometimes become an injustice committed by withholding an answer. On the twenty-first day Sadanand claims that Harinath's silence signifies agreement concerning Ramvati Devi's land. Harinath breaks his vow with a clear "No." Afterwards he corrects the ashram's announcements and writes in his notebook that remaining silent and listening attentively are not the same thing. To renounce speech when an answer is necessary may be not spirituality but an evasion of responsibility.

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Story 704 · Dream

Since childhood, Ishan has repeatedly dreamed of a mysterious bridge. As he grows older, the appearance in his dreams of a library, the following day’s date and familiar people in unfamiliar circumstances makes him doubt the distinction between dreaming and waking. He keeps an account of his experiences, seeks evidence for his memories and conducts small tests with Nachiketa. Some dreams do not match actual events; some memories mingle with what he has experienced while awake. Ishan neither declares the experiences supernatural truths nor dismisses them all as false. At last he abandons the habit of giving every experience a definitive name in advance. Writing down an ordinary sentence at dawn becomes, for him, a release from the demand for unnecessary certainty.

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Light — Stories Across Lifetimes

Story 705 · Doubt

At school, Master Shailesh explains the scientific causes of eclipses and teaches the children that asking questions is not disrespectful. Yet, when the time comes for his father's shraddha rites, he finds himself caught between his mother's beliefs, traditional observances and his own rationalist outlook. In conversation with the priest Krishnamohan, he refuses to pronounce claims that cannot be established, while acknowledging the human value of setting aside time to remember someone together. He fears that expenditure, caste and coercion may be legitimised in the name of tradition. The priest, too, accepts that objectionable elements of a rite must be open to criticism. In the end Shailesh acknowledges that he does not know what effect rituals have upon the dead, while recording their importance in the experience of the living. Doubt emerges not as arrogance but as care.

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Story 706 · Liberation

During the last days of the elderly Dayakant’s life, his daughter Shubhada, his sons Nachiketa and Shashank, his granddaughter Ira and other relatives care for him. The pond visible through the window, memories of his wife Kamala, an unfinished letter and old family disagreements reveal the many layers of his life. Questions arise over where and how his funeral rites should be performed, but Dayakant does not insist that his death be confined within anyone’s definitive interpretation. After he dies, the household’s estrangements are not miraculously erased, though conversation begins again. Shubhada seeks her own path between remembrance and the life still being lived. The story does not compress moksha into a single philosophical answer; it holds open the possibilities of letting go, accepting, and living alongside questions that remain unresolved.

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Story 707 · Chhath

In Pipra, a proposal to divide the paths at the Chhath ghat with four bamboo poles and rope leads to an argument in the committee. Its members speak of organisation and safety, but Sukhdev Sahni and Champa raise the village's history of caste divisions and the question of equal access to the ghat. At the first meeting, too little attention is paid to women's voices and the true importance of their labour. During the crowding at the offering of arghya, a rope is untied so an elderly woman can be helped; the bamboo, instead of marking a boundary, becomes a means of assistance. When the loudspeaker falls silent, the river and the communal songs can be heard. Afterwards the committee resolves to reserve no pathway on the basis of donations or office, to include women's representatives and to protect the workers. Making the ghat belong to everyone begins to move beyond declarations.

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Story 708 · Raga

After Chhath, Harihar Mahto sings an old song on the ghat at Pipra. Naina, who has come to collect sound recordings, wishes to record his performance, but Harihar asks how twenty years of practice could fit into a single minute of sound. An old cassette contains the voice of his elder sister Kusuma, whose name was omitted from the first catalogue. Naina learns the importance of recording the source, obtaining permission and preserving distinct forms of performance. As she practises, she learns Harihar's rhythm while finding a new turn in her own voice. Later that change enters Munni's singing as well. The story makes clear that saving a tradition does not mean preserving a sound in exact imitation; it means listening carefully enough, within living practice, to distinguish an error from a new path.

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Light — Stories Across Lifetimes

Story 709 · The Court

A dispute over ownership of a strip of land beside Pipra’s ghat reaches the court. The story takes shape through differing testimonies. A representative of the ghat committee recounts the history of communal use; the claimant produces documents concerning boundaries and title; Champa Paswan recalls that access to the old “public” ghat was not equal for everyone. A map made by a teacher has circulated on social media as misleading proof, and the teacher himself explains its limitations. At an inspection of the site, the river’s present course, old maps, spoken memories and marks of past use yield no single, uncomplicated conclusion. The story does not impose a final decision about ownership; it reveals the difficult judicial process of establishing truth among mutually conflicting forms of evidence.

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Story 710 · The Postman

After thirty years of service, Dinbandhu Paswan, the postman of Pipra, retires. Delivering letters, money orders, examination papers and judicial notices, he has carried in his memory the village's changing people, houses and roads. Letters with incomplete addresses show him how a person's life may change while the old identifying marks survive on paper. At his farewell, villagers recount small memories of his care and humanity. Dinbandhu prepares a list of delivery routes for the new postman, Vivek, but teaches him to confirm an address with people rather than merely count the houses. The next day Vivek begins searching for the true recipient of a postcard addressed to a name on an old wall. Delivering the mail becomes a responsibility towards human relationships.

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Story 711 · In a Foreign Land

A labourer working the night shift abroad writes a letter to the Kamala ghat in his home village of Pipra. The ghat has no postal address, but addressing that inanimate place allows him to say things he has been unable to tell his family. Seeing Chhath on a small mobile-phone screen, and recalling the changed river, a red chair and the steps, he feels the weight of his absence. His earnings pay for the roof at home, education, medical treatment and debts, and so the date of his return is repeatedly postponed. He can find no easy resolution between his love of home and his financial responsibilities. Finally, he decides to keep the letter with him, so that when he is able to return he may see for himself the difference between the actual ghat and the one preserved in his memory.

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Story 712 · Doom

During a flood on the Kamala, Sumitra prepares to protect her home and her nine-year-old son Neelu. The water rises, and Neelu disappears; his body is never found. On official papers he is “missing”; in the speech of the villagers he has “gone in the flood”; in his mother’s life his absence bears another meaning altogether. Sumitra goes on with the daily labour of mourning: washing soaked clothes, clearing mud from the house and looking after her son’s belongings. When the rains come the following year, fear returns, but she does not abandon practical preparations against the water. Her son does not come back, yet her life does not stop at a single conclusion. In the lantern light she clears the drain and measures out rice for the next morning’s meal.

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Story 713 · The Ghost

Driving his rickshaw at night, Jagdish repeatedly takes a woman wearing a grey veil to an old temple. She vanishes behind the steps, and the village quickly begins telling a ghost story. People add a face, a sari and an old death from their own imaginations, while Jagdish insists on recounting only what he has seen. He examines the path to the temple and its possible exits, finding a few ordinary clues, but cannot establish the woman’s identity. Even after her visits cease, the rumour continues. Jagdish refuses to use the word “ghost” to pass judgment upon events he has not witnessed. He trusts the limited reach of truth as he trusts the small lamp on his rickshaw: it can illuminate only so much of the road.

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Story 714 · Master Sahib

Jagannath Mishra, a teacher at Pipra High School, retires after forty years of service. On his last day, former pupils bring before him differing memories of strict discipline, fairness, mistakes and affection. One recounts a humiliation; another remembers how his teaching supported a life. Jagannath Babu understands that a teacher’s influence cannot be measured only by a syllabus or examination results. When the clock presented by the school is hung at home, time takes on a new meaning: the sequence of bells and attendance registers has ended. The following morning he picks up his bag out of habit, but it now holds some essential papers belonging to a former pupil. His retirement does not bring to an end his journey of learning and working for others.

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Story 715 · The Painter

Urmila Devi of Pipra paints mobile towers, bicycles and the red chair at the Chhath ghat alongside the traditional fish and lotus motifs of her Mithila paintings. When her work reaches an exhibition in Delhi, she discovers how its presentation, the proper crediting of her name and the covering of its margins can change its meaning. Amid commercial expectations and demands for repetition, she explains that she can paint the same subject again, but cannot reproduce her first experience exactly. Through her conversations with her daughter Rupa and the organiser Ira emerge both the artist's rights over her work and the differing perspectives of those who view it. In the end she begins a new painting of the ghat at night, with an empty chair and a distant red light. Still free from the demands of the market, it remains an unfinished journey of her own vision.

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Story 716 · The Return

Twenty years after leaving, Renuka returns to Pipra upon the death of her father Devkant. Conflicting stories have long circulated in the village about her decision to leave the family home after her marriage. Her brother Arun, her sister-in-law Meena and her nephew Anshu receive her return through their separate fears, questions and memories. Matters of a share in the land, care of the house and old documents arise, but Renuka refuses to have her life confined to an explanation prepared by someone else. Before going back to the city she gives Anshu the key to a room: the key is in his hand, but responsibility for its use belongs to everyone. Anshu comes to understand that his aunt’s relationships involve legal shares, a sense of place and her choices in her own life. No single word can encompass an entire human being.

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Story 717 · The Boat

Eager to cross to the other side of the river, Gopi and Jhunki build a raft from banana stems. Rather than understand why the adults have forbidden the crossing, they set off into the current on their own. The water near the bank seems easy to negotiate, but in midstream their bamboo pole no longer reaches the bottom and the raft begins drifting away. After fear and struggle, Jabbar and the boatman Bisun bring them safely back. Their friends want a thrilling account, but Jhunki will not decorate the river's real dangers with an imaginary crocodile. Bisun teaches them about a proper boat, load, oars and currents. They name their raft "Come Back Again"—not to celebrate reaching the other bank, but to recognise the greater meaning of returning alive.

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Story 718 · Chhath Once More

At the following Chhath in Pipra, changes learned from the previous year's dispute at the ghat have been put into practice. The old bamboo barriers have gone, a passage for assistance has been made, and women's representatives take part in decisions. But after the death of Badri Kaka, his red chair raises new questions about remembrance and public use. Should it remain empty, or should a tired person be allowed to sit on it? This small disagreement reveals the distance between grief and practical need. Fresh difficulties arise over the loudspeaker, cleanliness and assistance, but this time people find solutions more quickly. In the end the chair returns home and the ghat resumes its ordinary uses. Change is neither complete nor a proclaimed victory; little by little it finds its place in daily conduct.

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Story 719 · Videha

In an old chest in Jagadamba Devi's house lie names, letters, memories and fragments of unfinished writing. Naina and Anupama consider connecting this private collection with the voices of other people, but recognise the dangers of displaying suffering, publishing testimony without permission and treating an archive as final truth. The word "Videha", written on an old empty envelope belonging to Devnath, becomes the name of a new publication. His unfinished dream is not turned into a compulsory inheritance. Many people contribute their experiences, make corrections, and withhold permission for certain things to appear in print. Issues of Videha are published with the variety and disagreements of local life intact. Naina deliberately leaves a page of the next issue blank, preserving room for the consent and individual voice of whoever may speak next.

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Smritik Dosar Dis

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Story 720 · Two Janakpurs

After Kamala Devi's death, her son Amresh Jha comes to Janakpur searching for his mother's parental home. The clues she left him and a brass key fail to reveal the house's address. Yet a map of the city shows, alongside the Janakpur of the present, another Janakpur that survives in memory. With help from Savitri Devi and an old survey, he begins to understand the paths of his mother's childhood and the three different meanings of "home". Even without finding conclusive proof of the threshold he seeks, Amresh comes to feel that a home lives on in people's memories, relationships and voices.

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Story 721 · The Forgotten Debate

Nilima Jha, a custodian of manuscripts, discovers an old scholarly debate concerning rights over a watercourse. In Kanakpur, where a dispute over land and access to water is underway, an incomplete reference in the manuscript spreads as supposed proof of an ancient ruling. On examination, Nilima finds that the debate may be an imaginary dialogue composed as an exercise for students. She explains this distinction to the village council. Phulkumari Devi, however, points out that the questions raised in the dialogue still apply to the actual dispute. The villagers turn instead to considering measurements of the land, the flow of water, the losses suffered and the responsibility for maintaining the channel together.

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Story 722 · The Pond of Time

Grieving her mother's death, Mridula sees at her maternal family's pond a vision of a possible future. It shows a new life with Nachiket, but her son Aditya's place within it remains indistinct. The experience leaves her afraid to decide upon a second marriage. Janki Mami's words, and conversations with Aditya and Nachiket's family, help her understand that a glimpse of the future is not a final truth. Respecting the wishes and apprehensions of both children, she proposes that they build a shared life gradually. When she returns to the pond, she stirs the water. She has decided not to watch the future unfold, but to take part in making it.

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Story 723 · The City of Letters

City planner Nirupama Karn is charged with preparing a clear map for the book fair in Siddhapur. Modern street numbers and directional signs prove inadequate to the old city's intricate network of lanes. From her father Hemkant's recollections of routes and languages, Nirupama learns that the same city opens through different ways of speaking in Maithili, Hindi and Nepali. She devises multilingual signs, and every group taking part in a trial reaches its destination. Yet a child shows her a narrow passage that her map has overlooked. Nirupama comes to understand that no map can encompass every possible experience of a city.

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Story 724 · The Final Commentary

While tending the damaged pages of an ancient work called Pramana-Viveka at a manuscript conservation centre, Raghunandan Sah finds a thin strip that everyone has regarded as a later commentary. Examination of its paper, ink and wording suggests that the question written on the strip may predate the main treatise. If so, the accepted relationship between the original work and its commentary is reversed. Rather than impose a definite conclusion, the scholars acknowledge the limits of the evidence available to them. At an exhibition, the strip is granted significance in its own right, and its question invites readers to reconsider where a line of thought begins.

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Story 725 · The Map That Kept Growing

Historian Ramapati Jha is commissioned to draw a historical map of settlements along the Kamala River. A map made from government records proves incomplete beside local memories, the river's changing course, displaced villages and the old paths taken by women. As he adds layers of evidence and time, the map grows continually larger. Ramapati prepares an introductory map and a detailed chronological panel, preserving the distinction between written records and people's experience. At the museum a child asks what comes next. Ramapati leaves a blank strip for evidence the future may yet bring.

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Story 726 · One Writer, Two Births

Anagha Karn's award-winning story, Rekha, is accused of borrowing its words from a Tirhuta text two hundred years old. An investigation reveals intricate connections among her grandmother's notebook, oral tradition and an old tale by Govinddas. Although the words are alike, the older text presents Dhaneshwari's action as a warning against transgressing social boundaries, while Anagha sees it as preserving a path and a relationship. A public reading brings forth differing interpretations from the audience. The story offers no easy answer to the question of literary ownership: the same words acquire new meanings when time and perspective change.

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Story 727 · A Dictionary of Memory

The elderly lexicographer Malati Mishra has devoted her life to preserving Maithili words that are falling out of use. While writing the meaning of osara, the veranda, she finds her memories of her parents growing dim. Old examples entered in her notebook do not always agree with what she remembers now, making her question the reliability of memory. Her granddaughter Ira advises her to record the changing recollection instead of erasing the earlier line. At last Malati understands that a word lives not merely in a dictionary's definition but in people's unselfconscious speech. When Ira sits on the veranda and remarks how pleasant the breeze is, Malati experiences the pleasure of a word being lived.

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Story 728 · Chapter Zero

Sudha Jha, of the district library, discovers a concealed 'Chapter Zero' in a novel called Twelve Rooms. Its clues compel the reader to ask where an event truly begins. Reading the novel in different sequences, Sudha and Nachiketa arrive at different understandings of the actions of its character Sarita. Meanwhile, Sudha and her sister Seema are at odds over their mother's death and family papers. Considering the events in a changed order, Sudha realises that the point is not to pronounce someone innocent, but to examine one's own assumption about the first cause. She allows a new reader to begin the story wherever her own question begins.

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Story 729 · The Copyist

Sudhindra Das, a copyist in a centre for preserving vernacular manuscripts, is assigned to transcribe Ramdulari Devi's The Song of Seven Courtyards. Seeing many interventions, uncertain letters and later corrections in the old manuscript, he realises that even the 'original' has a history written by many hands. His inclination to make a clean copy can sometimes turn a doubtful word into a certainty. He could fill in an almost-erased line on the last page by conjecture, but chooses not to. At the exhibition he leaves the incomplete passage exactly as it is. In responsible transcription, refraining from writing can itself be a way of protecting the truth.

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Story 730 · A Third History

Manikant Mishra is entrusted with writing the inscription for a centenary memorial to Belwaghat's 'Night of Grain' during the famine of 1927. Two familiar accounts of the incident, when grain was brought out of a storehouse, assign different heroes and different motives. Examining an old play, local recollections and account books, he finds that later narratives have influenced one another. Acknowledging that he cannot establish everyone's part with certainty, he chooses to inscribe only what the evidence confirms: people gathered, and grain was brought out. The story locates historical integrity in the preservation of uncertainty.

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Story 731 · The Translator

Translating a sentence from a Persian letter into Maithili, Nasim Ara struggles to convey the relationship between home, distant lands, a threshold and changing speech. From 1983 through the decades that follow, she chooses new words repeatedly; experience, family conversations and the pronunciation of successive generations challenge her earlier versions. When the translation is published, she presents several versions of the same sentence, made at different times, together with the reasons for her decisions. Young readers find further meanings, and Nasim arrives at a sense of claiming the 'voice that has returned' as her own. She refuses to call this version final, for both language and home remain in motion.

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Story 732 · The Nameless Deity

Collecting folktales in Kachnariya, Vibha Jha hears a story of a deity whose name the storytellers deliberately do not utter. At first she regards the silence as missing information. After Devnath tells her the name in private, she understands that the collective tradition gives meaningful space to the pause where the name would be. A schoolboy, Neel, continues the tale and follows the custom of falling silent at that point. Vibha preserves the pause in her sound recording but does not fill in the absent name. The story reveals the relation between safeguarding communal memory and respecting its confidential boundaries.

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Story 733 · The Pathway Through Time

Nilima returns to Sirsiya to divide ancestral land with her brother Shekhar, only to disagree with him over rights to an old footpath. Walking along it, she experiences scenes from different times: a flood, her mother's struggles and relationships from childhood. Through this passage across time she understands that a path is not merely a line drawn across land, but a common life sustained from generation to generation. Back at home, she admits to Shekhar that their memories of the past differ. They move the boundary stones of their respective shares slightly, leaving enough room for two people to walk side by side.

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Story 734 · The Lineage of the Mirror

Madhavi Jha, a keeper of genealogical registers in Saurath, is asked to examine the compatibility of two lineages for Kaushiki's marriage. A reference to a 'mirror' in an old register entangles the history of blood ties, shelter and people who have been taken into a household. The dispute reaches beyond the marriage to rights over an old orchard. Madhavi refuses to treat an ambiguous mark in the records as conclusive proof of either descent or property. Listening to the memories of elderly relatives, she records the differing accounts and distinguishes an image of kinship from blood lineage. In the end, a three-panelled mirror becomes an image of human bonds formed through responsibility, companionship and refuge.

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Story 735 · The Invisible Book

Renuka Karn is asked to find the original copy of a supposedly ancient book called The Shared Lamp. It is often quoted, but no one possesses the original manuscript; its author, date and textual form are disputed. Comparing quotations in notebooks, school booklets, household registers and research papers, Renuka concludes that there is insufficient evidence to reconstruct a single, coherent original work. She opposes publishing a conjectured text under the name of the original, and sets out the source and uncertainty of each quotation separately. An empty glass display case at the exhibition becomes a symbol of the necessity of acknowledging the limits of evidence.

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Story 736 · The Seventh Direction

At a centre for local memory, Anuja Jha discovers a map called The Seventh Direction. Its red lines do not mark physical distances; they indicate ways of passing from one memory to another. Smells, voices, families and forgotten places lead different people along different sequences. While preparing an exhibition of the map, Anuja rejects a suggestion that an extra arrow be drawn to show the 'seventh direction'. Following the memory of her sister Meera from childhood to the sound of her present-day voice, she experiences how memory does not carry us only into the past. It can also bring us back to a relationship that remains alive.

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Story 737 · The Last Reader

An old public reading room in Sonbarsa burns down, and Raghupati Mishra, who has read there all his life, tries to rewrite its books from memory. When surviving copies are found, however, many of his remembered stories prove different from the works themselves. Raghupati, Madhavi and a younger generation of readers consider the difference between an original text, recollection and fresh creation. The reading room reopens, and Raghupati chooses to regard what his memory has produced as a new book rather than a copy of a lost one. Reading alongside the young woman Neha, he understands that a tradition of reading has no final reader.

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Story 738 · The Incident at the Pond

At the newly built ghat of the Baraila pond, the adolescent Gunja slips and falls into the water. Munna Paswan pulls her out. Afterwards, differing stories circulate in the village about Gunja's carelessness, unfinished construction, a red cord, the contractor and local opposition. As the village council investigates, it becomes clearer which details were witnessed and which were merely inferred. The landing was unstable, there was no effective barrier, and several small decisions had combined to increase the danger. Rather than identify a single culprit, Gunja considers it necessary to understand the full circumstances of the accident.

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Story 739 · The Night at the Royal Court

A fire in the old court at Ratanpur is described by the official history as a 'conspiracy of outside troublemakers'. Archana Jha, a newly appointed archivist, searches for the basis of that conclusion, examining accounts from soldiers, the women's quarters, priests, merchants and the royal chronicle. Each witness had a different vantage point, interest and limitation; none can establish the cause of the fire alone. Archana replaces the old accusatory plaque with one that acknowledges the disputed cause, and makes room for several voices in the exhibition. Simply gathering every source does not, by itself, produce a complete and undisputed truth.

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Story 740 · The Stolen Idol

When an idol disappears from the Bhuvaneshwari shrine at Amarahi, questions of faith, security and standing arise alongside accusations of theft. The watchman Baldev Paswan at first conceals the twelve minutes he was absent from his post, but later finds the courage to tell the truth. The investigation uncovers an earlier repair to the idol, a craftsperson's recollections and the differing interests of those involved. Even after the idol is returned, suspicion and hurt do not vanish at once. Arrangements for protecting the shrine are changed to recognise the watchman's basic needs as well. The story exposes layers of labour, poverty, error and collective responsibility beneath the question of faith.

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Story 741 · The Shot at the Border

Near the border at Rekhapur, a boundary stone has shifted. Taking the farmer Sadanand for a threat, the soldier Arun Tamang fires a shot. Accounts given by soldiers, the farmer, officials and a girl named Rani do not fully agree about a drain, the field, a pipe and a shouted warning. The inquiry establishes that the stone was not in its original position, and that feeling afraid is not proof of an actual threat. Compensation is granted, the boundary markers are corrected and training is changed, yet disagreements about what happened remain. The story examines the distance between remembering a procedure and the event itself, between hearing and reporting, and between a border and the land being farmed.

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Story 742 · The Wedding Dispute

Although the wedding canopy for Madhavi and Saurabh has been prepared, disputes arise over money changing hands, employment, where the couple will live after marriage and the expectations of their families. The bride and groom, their mothers, a friend and Kaushalya, the intermediary, give different reasons for what has happened. Madhavi's concern is not merely the sum involved but equal participation in decisions about her life. Saurabh cannot resolve his obligations towards his mother and the question of a new home. After the wedding is postponed, they acknowledge their uncertainties in letters. The interruption of a complicated relationship cannot be explained away by a single rumour.

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Story 743 · The Flood Boat

During the flood in Belahi, a relief boat called Mukti capsizes. Asked to account for the accident, the boatman, a teacher, a contractor, a passenger and an investigating officer emphasise different failures. Too many passengers, sacks of grain, inadequate repairs, a strong current, a sudden turn and the absence of another boat all have an effect. Blaming one person's decision cannot explain the whole danger. In the next flood, attention is paid to the boat's capacity, life jackets, a second boat and discipline among passengers. Travelling safely under the new arrangements, the frightened Tara begins to understand what collective safety means.

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Story 744 · The Painter’s Death

Twelve years later, the death of the painter Nachiket Mishra remains a mystery. Before the family house is sold, his daughter Ira examines unfinished paintings, an old platform and the diaries kept by family members. Accident, suicide, an unsafe platform, a quarrel and exhaustion each have indications in their favour, but none is supported by decisive evidence. The art world wants to turn the artist's greatness and death into a sensational story. Ira acknowledges the limits of the sources, recognising that four diaries do not reveal four deaths but four people's perspectives. The story confronts the ethical danger of passing hasty judgment on the life of someone who has died.

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Story 745 · The Old Lawsuit

Historian Anamika Mishra investigates an old land dispute over Bariyar Patti between her own family and the Mandal family. A court judgment, an old survey, patterns of cultivation, a footpath and oral recollections each suggest a different kind of right. She acknowledges that her family's interests influence her own perspective. In her notes, she separates what each source says from its evidence and limitations. The legal conclusion of the old case has not erased memories of how the land was used socially. Recording the boundary post, pathway and tree stump under separate headings, Anamika shows that a single line cannot contain the whole history of a landscape.

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Story 746 · The Night of the Fair

Twenty-four-year-old Manjari Karn suddenly goes missing at the Basaha fair. At home and in the village, rumours multiply: kidnapping, love, elopement and fear of marriage are all proposed as explanations. As the police and her family search, evidence from a bus, a lodging house, identity papers and eyewitnesses gradually clarifies her journey. Manjari left home to make decisions about her work and her life, but even the fragmentary letter she wrote does not disclose her whole state of mind. After her return, she keeps the letter, without treating it as the 'complete story'. The narrative reveals the clash between a woman's autonomy and other people's desire to decide what her life means.

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Story 747 · A Tale of Heroes

Preparing a joint cultural performance about an old conflict at Kajraghat, director Aditi Kumari finds two villages singing mutually opposed heroic ballads. In one tradition Veernath is the hero; in the other, Harikesh plays the central part. The same action is bravery to one side and wrongdoing to the other. Aditi does not alter the songs to manufacture agreement. Instead, she presents both versions and makes their contexts clear. Since the historical evidence is limited, the performance honours two traditions of heroism rather than glorifying a single figure. The story shows how changing versions of folk songs participate in the making of heroic memory.

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Story 748 · The Last Meal

Devaki Devi announces that she is considering giving part of her property to a girls' school. After disputes arise within the family, she dies on the night of a meal, and traces of poison found in the chutney deepen suspicion. The inquiry raises questions about contaminated ingredients, medication, health, inheritance and family quarrels, but finds no conclusive evidence of a crime. Later the family reaches an agreement over the orchard, house, storehouse and other rights. Years afterwards, when they gather again for a meal, Devaki's chair remains empty. The living impose their separate explanations upon an unanswered death, but none of those explanations is the whole truth.

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Story 749 · The Poet and the King

Researcher Ira Jha encounters conflicting accounts as she investigates why the poet Harinath was exiled from the Sonvarsha court. Poems, letters, a rival's complaint and a royal order all lend the event different meanings. An old draft shows that several accusations were under consideration at court, but it remains uncertain which of them the king accepted as true. Ira distinguishes the event from the explanations made afterwards. She sees that power influences whose account is heard most loudly, yet facts resist sufficiently to prevent history from becoming arbitrary. The poet's exile becomes a struggle over the ownership of meaning.

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Story 750 · The Accident at the Bend

Anil Mishra is injured when a car and a bicycle collide at the Navlakha bend. The crucial eleven seconds are missing from a surveillance recording, and arguments grow over the accounts of the driver Suresh, the witness Kamli and others. News reports and rumours fill the incomplete view to suit their own purposes. An investigation brings out the combined roles of the road's design, a stationary vehicle, signs, speed and restricted sightlines. Safety improvements are subsequently made at the bend, but the missing eleven seconds are never recovered. The story exposes the need for caution before gaps in evidence and the limits of placing all blame upon a single person.

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Story 751 · The Prize for a Lie

A dispute over originality arises around the prize-winning story The Voice of the Soil by Arunesh Mishra. Questions concerning credit for post-flood folk songs, source texts and editorial material bring the roles of the writer, editor and research assistants under scrutiny. Examining his earlier writing, Arunesh himself acknowledges an error in quotation. Public debate moves beyond the opposing portraits of a blameless great author and a literary thief, revealing instead the interwoven claims of influence, translation, memory and shared labour. Arunesh places a list of sources and an admission of error alongside his award. He comes to see that acknowledging another person’s contribution does not diminish what is his own in a work.

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Story 752 · The Fire in the Village

Sugiya Devi’s house burns down in the southern hamlet of Simariya. Speculation spreads through the village: a spark from an electric wire, ashes from the hearth, burning leaves, or deliberate arson connected with a land dispute. The inquiry cannot establish where the first spark arose, but it does identify the causes of the fire’s rapid spread: defective wiring, narrow approaches, a shortage of water and delayed relief. Sugiya’s granddaughter Rupa writes an essay calling not only for the culprit to be found but also for the system to be improved. Sugiya reminds her that not everyone’s voice is heard equally. Disaster and social power are inseparable in the account that emerges.

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Story 753 · Across the River

As the waters of the Kamala recede, remains resembling ancient stone steps emerge. One group calls the site a temple, another a Buddhist-era landing place, and a third claims it belongs to the Jain tradition. Researchers and local boatmen examine the evidence and find that the crossing may, over different periods, have served travel, trade, worship and journeys of other kinds. No single religious identity, however, can be established. A new bridge is built, yet the boats continue to ply the river. Crossing it, Anamika reflects that “this bank” and “the other bank” depend on where one stands. The river’s shared history cannot be confined within one claim.

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Story 754 · The Mason’s Fall

At the construction site of Samriddhi Sadan, the mason Budhan Sada warns of a cracked bamboo pole and a waterlogged joint in the scaffolding. No effective precaution follows; he climbs the dangerous structure, and an accident occurs. The inquiry uncovers the distinct decisions made by the manager, engineer, clerk and labourers. A worker’s supposed “free choice” cannot be understood apart from the demands of earning a living and the unequal relations of power. After the accident, inspection procedures, written stoppage orders and safety supervision are changed. Budhan’s family cannot be relieved of its suffering. Yet to speak of collective responsibility is not to erase the particular responsibility borne by individuals.

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Story 755 · The Old Photograph

While emptying a house, Nilam Jha finds an old photograph. Different families identify the young man at its centre as their own ancestor or relative. Examining several copies, the names written on the back, old journeys and family recollections only deepens the uncertainty. Nilam realises that a photograph can travel into many households and be given different names by succeeding generations. It bears witness to someone’s presence but cannot, by itself, disclose that person’s name, kinship or circumstances. In the end she leaves the question mark on the reverse untouched, accepting uncertainty as an honest part of the evidence.

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Story 756 · The Voice in the Night

On the night before their old mansion is to be sold, members of the Jha family hear an uncanny sound in the darkness. To one it seems a summons; another hears the name of a dead relative. Old silences and feelings of guilt stir within the family. Nachiket traces the course of the noise and discovers how walls, passages and the courtyard might alter its sound. Bricks alone, however, cannot explain why everyone heard different words in the same voice. When the mansion is demolished, the sound changes, but memory does not. The account holds together the architecture of a house and the history of the mind in the making of what people hear.

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Story 757 · Whose Fault?

After the death of fifteen-year-old Aditya, a school pupil, news reports and messaging groups begin circulating the names of his teacher, father and friends as people to blame. His diary, academic pressure, an inadequate counselling system and his classmates’ conduct all become subjects of inquiry. The investigation does not identify any one person as the cause of his death. It does, however, call for changes in teachers’ public remarks, support arrangements and failures of communication. The grieving family begins to understand the difference between assigning blame and accepting responsibility. The story turns towards a shared duty to speak carefully with other students in distress, to notice their silences and to offer help in time.

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Story 758 · The Scent of Makhana

Roasting makhana in her new home, Madhavi remembers her mother’s voice and the kitchen of her childhood home. At first she hesitates to prepare food in her marital household in the manner her mother taught her, but her mother-in-law honours the taste. A box of makhana sent from her parents’ home is shared with the family and neighbours. Little by little, what was learned in one household enters the daily life of another. Madhavi discovers that she need not distance herself from her husband’s home to preserve the memory of her parents’ home, nor erase an old fragrance to find a place in the new one. The scent becomes a bond between remembrance and a growing sense of belonging.

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Story 759 · The Yellow Flower

Anamika, daughter of the domestic worker Sushila, tends the garden at Revati Chaudhary's house. She is especially fond of its small yellow flowers, yet praise for the garden's beauty seldom includes either her name or her labour. A photographic exhibition and her experience of tending the plants lead her to think about her identity, wages and right to make decisions. She has her responsibilities put in writing and refuses to let her work remain invisible. In the final photograph it is her face and earth-stained hands, rather than the flowers alone, that can be seen clearly. The yellow blossom comes to signify the dignity of labour and her recognition of herself.

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Story 760 · The Luncheon Table

Four old friends gather for lunch at Prabha Jha’s house. Beneath the easy conversation and familiar affection, differences in income, profession, domestic work and social standing gradually become apparent. The presence of the domestic worker Rama and her daughter Kajal makes visible the labour that usually goes unseen in the dining room. The meaning of advice, scholarship procedures and offers of small assistance changes according to each woman’s circumstances. Prabha begins to reconsider the time and rights involved in the work done in her home. Even at a table set with friendship and laughter, the marks left by inequality of labour, class and opportunity remain.

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Story 761 · Kajal

On her first day at school as a history teacher, Ira lines her eyes with kajal. Her grandmother, Sharda Devi, draws the line for her and remembers her own unfinished attempt at teacher training in her youth. Their conversation brings to light the hopes of two generations, lost opportunities and the courage required to choose one’s path. After Ira leaves, Sharda puts kajal on her own eyes for the first time in years. One line is slightly crooked, but she does not wipe it away. A beginning made by the younger generation can awaken in the older one a renewed consciousness of its own life in the present.

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The Other Side of Memory

Story 762 · The New Curtain

Arati Jha hangs a new, light curtain in the sitting room and gives the old one to Savita, who works in her household. Savita cuts the heavy fabric to fit her smaller home, where a curtain matters not only as decoration but also for air and privacy. When a photograph is taken of Arati's new curtain, Savita's hand appears unintentionally in the frame. Arati later chooses to acknowledge her presence rather than remove it. Savita comes to see that a curtain is not merely something that conceals. It also raises the question of which parts of life are shown, and whose labour is kept out of sight.

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Story 763 · Fragrance

A small bottle of perfume given to Nilima by a colleague in Delhi suddenly calls up the old courtyard of her village, Pipra. She wears the scent repeatedly, but each time a different image rises before her: a school, a wedding, a hospital, or sometimes nothing at all. Returning to the village during her mother’s illness, she encounters the courtyard’s present fragrance. She understands that memory is not a fixed house sealed inside a bottle, but an experience transformed by the mind and body as they live in the present. In the end, instead of trying only to recover the past, she accepts the scent of the present as well.

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Story 764 · The Silver Bowl

At Manjari Devi’s house, silver bowls are reserved for distinguished guests. In the name of taking proper care of them, she refuses to entrust them to Parvati, who works in the household. Conversations with her daughter-in-law Sumedha, together with the habits of daily life, lead Manjari to question a tradition of mistrust inherited from her mother’s time. Realising that the value of an object and trust in a person are different matters, she gives Parvati responsibility for the bowls. This small change suggests a different regard for domestic labour and the worker who performs it. What matters more than the sheen of silver is the fading of a suspicion passed down with the bowls for years.

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Story 765 · Drying Their Hair

After the rain stops, Kiran and her elder sister Mrinalini dry their hair on the terrace and speak about marriage and independence. A proposal has been made for Kiran, but before consenting she wants clarity about work, where she will live and her right to make decisions. Mrinalini recalls how, in her own marriage, she mistook her family’s “yes” for her own. With her sister’s support, Kiran is able to speak separately with Abhishek, yet even after the meeting she does not decide at once. Like hair still partly wet, this unsettled interval is not a failure to be complete, but a natural process through which a decision takes shape in its own time.

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Story 766 · White Flowers

Returning from the funeral rites of her aunt Sushma Devi, Ragini notices the beauty of white flowers along the road and feels guilty for seeing beauty in the midst of mourning. Her mother, recalling an earlier bereavement, explains that the body's sensations and the mind's sorrow do not always move in the same rhythm. Ragini brings orange flowers, her aunt's favourites, and only then begins to weep. Later, living flowers, her aunt's laughter and tears return together in memory. Rather than prescribing a single correct way to behave in grief, the story allows different feelings to exist side by side.

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Story 767 · A Small Party

Fifteen-year-old Sonali accompanies her mother Sushila to help at a wealthy family's "small party". Amid the birthday decorations and presents, she sees the children's delight, yet also feels her distance from their world because of the work she and her mother do. Sonali loves drawing, and her picture of the party gives the kitchen, broom, water and working hands no less space than the cake and balloons. The mistress of the house pays her separately for the drawing. Sonali understands that a celebration takes its shape also from the labour of those usually left outside its picture.

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Story 768 · The Silk Dupatta

Sudha, a history teacher, buys herself a violet silk dupatta, but a male colleague’s comment at school makes her hesitate to wear it. Talking to her daughter Ishani gives her the courage to trust her own liking rather than another person’s gaze. When she wears the dupatta again, compliments and ordinary routines alike become part of its life. Even when it is stained with chalk in the classroom, she no longer sees the mark as a calamity. The dupatta has ceased to be merely an attractive object bought in a shop; it has become something lived in, alongside her body, work, daughter and experience.

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Story 769 · Rain at the Window

One rainy afternoon, Rama asks her husband Arvind to make tea for her. This seemingly ordinary request opens a conversation about the division of work established over many years, and about the teaching profession Rama abandoned. Arvind had never explicitly forbidden her to work, but concern for the house, children and responsibilities had steadily pushed her aspirations aside. After their conversation, Rama takes out her old certificates and begins teaching neighbourhood children. Arvind also learns to support her. On another rainy day, Rama finds it equally easy to decline a cup of tea. The story discovers in marriage the importance of listening and leaving room for another person's answer.

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Story 770 · The Taste of Lemon

Sandhya gives lemon juice to her ailing mother, Devaki Devi, and suddenly hears herself repeating the very instructions her mother used to give her as a child. The reversal of caregiving roles brings tenderness but also discomfort between the generations. The mother wishes to do some things herself, while the daughter wants to protect her. Gradually Sandhya understands that care does not mean taking every decision into one's own hands; it also means acknowledging another person's abilities. As Sandhya prepares to leave, her mother gives her lemons. Their changing sharpness becomes a way of sensing how time alters the proportions of memory and relationship.

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Story 771 · The Pink Cup

At the office, a pink cup has come to belong in Madhavi’s mind to her daily tea and five minutes of private rest. When she sees it in someone else’s hands, she feels that even this small preference of hers has been disregarded. Conversations with a new colleague and a trainee teach her to distinguish personal wishes, shared belongings and clearly stated rights. Sameera writes her name on her own cup; Madhavi leaves the pink cup unmarked, because she can now speak openly about what she likes. One day she drinks tea from a white cup, and the five minutes are still hers. Self-respect lies less in exclusive possession than in the ability to voice one’s needs.

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Story 772 · The Scent of Sunlight

Kamala Devi takes a violet sari belonging to her dead elder sister Manjari from an old trunk and spreads it in the sunshine. Its smell recalls her sister's laughter, their small quarrels and memories left unfinished. At her daughter-in-law's suggestion, Kamala wears the sari herself for the first time. By evening, the older scent has mingled with that of her own living body. She realises that memory does not remain entirely unchanged, and that not every unfinished sentence between two people requires a resolution. Instead of shutting the sari once more into the dark trunk, she hangs it in her wardrobe.

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Story 773 · The Earrings

Gauri, a domestic worker, buys herself a small pair of gold earrings from her savings. Her employer, Sudha Devi, is at first surprised that Gauri should have bought such a thing for herself, but their conversation makes Sudha aware of her own assumptions. Gauri's simple explanation is that she liked the earrings. Sudha remembers the silver pair she bought with her first salary and the comments made about them at home. The two women share the right to their own tastes, although their economic positions and the balance of power between their households do not thereby become equal. Gauri must be seen as a person of independent desires and character, not merely as an emblem of deprivation.

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Story 774 · Red Nail Polish

Ruchika paints her nails with red polish given to her by a friend, provoking a family dispute about growing up, propriety and personal preference. Between her parents' hesitation and her grandmother's ready support, she begins to understand her right to decide for herself. Her grandmother paints her own nails, and gradually Ruchika's mother chooses a colour too. A small change enters the family's habits. Later, Ruchika is happy on a day when she leaves her nails unpainted. She realises that freedom means not only being able to wear a colour when she wishes, but also being free not to wear one.

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Story 775 · The Sheer Curtain

After surgery, a sheer curtain hangs between Anamika and another patient, Sarita, in a hospital ward. It cannot stop sound or shadow, yet it creates a necessary boundary between the two women. Each senses the other’s anxiety without insisting on details of her illness. A brief good wish is enough when they part. Back at home, Anamika does not pass on Sarita’s private troubles to her daughter. Compassion is not always made of searching questions; sometimes the deepest respect for privacy is to refrain from intruding, even when one has heard enough to ask.

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Story 776 · Cardamom

For forty years Harinarayan Jha has complained about the cardamom in the tea made by his wife Sudha. While Sudha is away, he discovers that something is missing from the familiar taste. Old memories, household expense slips and conversations between husband and wife reveal how both liking and complaint have hardened into habits over time. When Sudha returns, each speaks plainly about wanting a different amount of cardamom, and finally they exchange their cups. The small exchange illuminates a deeper truth of married life: roles, tastes and preferences are not fixed, and living together requires listening anew, again and again.

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Story 777 · The Flower Vase

When an old glass flower vase breaks in Shailaja Devi's house, family members begin blaming one another. Eight-year-old Ira notices different parts of the incident—the breakage itself, the unsteady table and the flowers that had already wilted—while for her grandmother the vase holds fifty years of history. The family pieces the fragments together and repairs the table leg as well. The mended vase can no longer be used quite as before, but it has not lost its meaning. The child learns that each person sees only a part of what has happened; even the combined experiences of grandmother, mother and child cannot be contained in a single way of looking.

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Story 778 · The Dried Kamala

A seventy-eight-year-old narrator returns to the abandoned course of the Kamala River, inwardly addressing a dead brother named Gopi. Amid altered fields, embankments, houses and people, fragments of the life they shared rise into memory. Information offered by local young people both supplements those old recollections and puts some of them in doubt. The narrator understands that the drying of one channel does not mean the river itself has ceased to exist, yet what has truly been destroyed cannot honestly be declared still alive. Taking leave of the brother in thought, the narrator accepts that, in the end, it is the living who must lift their feet and carry on.

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Story 779 · A House of Sand

Subhadra Devi returns with her family to the sands of the Kosi, searching for the place where their lost village once stood. Her son Prabhakar, daughter Kaveri and granddaughter Mita remember courtyards, doorways and trees in differing shapes. The outlines of a house drawn in the sand keep changing; no one can turn a private recollection into a map accepted by all. Subhadra does not order her granddaughter to remember the story. She asks only that Mita preserve whatever stays with her naturally. The family takes away neither sand nor brick, yet many versions of the house remain within them.

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Story 780 · The Sound of Bamboo

Spending one last night in his old house before its sale, Shivnath hears the bamboo rubbing together and imagines the sound of his dead father's walking stick. It awakens remorse about the night his father died: Shivnath had deliberately left his telephone call unanswered. Speaking of it to his wife Nilam, he shares for the first time a burden borne for years. He discusses with his sister and the rest of the family what is to become of the house, the bamboo and the stick. He comes to understand that the sound has its physical cause, while guilt has its own history. He can remain connected to his father's memory without confusing the two.

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Story 781 · The Dusty Footpath

Returning to his village after thirty-five years, Divakar can no longer recognise the footpath he once knew, though the villagers still remember his father, Shashibhushan Mishra, by name. Elderly people, women and adolescents he encounters along the way recall different relationships, acts of work and small incidents. Divakar discovers sides of his father missing from the family's memories: a man who taught one person to write a name and showed another the way. He records many names in a notebook without calling the list a complete history. The footpath remains in use, its remembered shape continually changing; his father's name lives on, too, in the shared conduct of the village.

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Story 782 · The Empty Pond

On returning to his village, Naresh finds that the pond of his childhood has dried up completely. The old people sitting on its bank still speak in the present tense of drownings, games and names associated with its waters. Naresh tries to reconcile their different accounts, but refuses to turn an incomplete recollection into established fact. As the boy Anmol walks across the dry bed, he asks questions about one of those old incidents. The pond has become a footpath where water once stood, yet the old water survives in the speech of the village. The story brings the physical transformation of a place into the same frame as the life preserved in language.

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Story 783 · Erosion

The Kamala River’s erosion advances towards the old burial memorials of Ramlochan’s family. His grandson Avinash measures the shrinking land with a measuring tape, while Ramlochan worries about preserving ancestral memory and the dignity of the place. The family can do little to halt the river. They carry away names, old bricks and whatever else can be saved to a safer site. When the river changes its bend again, the exact location of the memorials can no longer be determined. The family will not present conjecture as fact in the name of reverence. Erosion takes away certainty along with earth, the story shows, but it need not take away honesty towards memory.

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Story 784 · The Scent of Earth

The smell of wet earth in the first rain of the city recalls to Sudhanshu many memories of his dead mother. Alongside affection come old quarrels, regret and questions left unresolved at the end of her life. A conversation with his sister Shobha makes him realise that the same mother lives differently in their respective memories. Rather than treating the scent of earth as his mother herself, Sudhanshu sees it as one possible doorway into remembrance. Where an event remains uncertain, he leaves the space empty instead of filling it with invention. In the end he remembers her even without rain: memory has become independent of the scent that first awakened it.

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Story 785 · The Roofless House

Returning to his village after eighteen years, Ghareshwar Jha discovers that the roof of his ancestral house has been blown away. As he considers repairs, land papers and the possibility of selling, news reaches him of old friends, teachers and neighbours. The deaths of familiar people and the altered lives of others make him aware that, absorbed in business, he had stopped asking about the village. He does not rebuild the entire house immediately. First he saves one room, repairs the gate and arranges for its care. Even from far away, he learns to inquire about the house as it is now. Roofless, it becomes an incomplete yet possible living bond with an absent past.

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Story 786 · The River Spoke

Jatan Sahni, an elderly boatman on the Bagmati, says the river calls people by name. At the landing, some hear his claim as a mystery, some as fancy, and others as a mistake of ageing ears. In the river's sounds, Jatan himself sometimes fears hearing the names of the dead, sometimes his own. Conversations with his wife Devaki and the routines of his work on the boat help him distinguish sound from fear and story. There is no conclusive evidence that the river has spoken a name at all. In the end, Jatan refuses to declare an indistinct noise a definite summons. Fear remains, but he carries on with the ordinary work of living.

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Story 787 · The Ground Gives Way

During a night-time subsidence, the courtyard of Kaushalya Devi's old home sinks into the earth. As the family moves to safety, they recall the house's arrangement, the tulsi shrine, the cot and the places where old possessions stood. Dinesh, Raghav, Saroj and Mira remember things differently; Kaushalya herself acknowledges changes made over the years. Part of the old house is salvaged, and a new one is built. Mira writes down the old and new memories separately, without erasing anyone's earlier account. A house may be rebuilt in memory after its ground has collapsed, the story suggests, but memory is not the soil with which the sunken earth can be filled.

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Story 788 · The Field of Kans Grass

Hearing a little girl call out across a field of kans grass, Taramani remembers Phuliya, who disappeared long ago. Villagers offer different guesses about the voice and about Phuliya’s last days, but no decisive answer emerges. Talking with her niece Nilima, Taramani accepts that it would be wrong to turn every child’s voice into Phuliya’s. The transformed field preserves no certain trace of the missing girl. Taramani remembers her now as a child, now as a woman who might have grown old, and sometimes simply as a name. Rather than invent a reassuring ending for the unanswered grief of disappearance, the story allows that grief to remain unfinished.

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Story 789 · The Dust of Tirhut

At eighty-four, the cart-driver Jagesar measures the roads of Tirhut not by milestones but by the names of dead passengers who once rode in his bullock cart. Walking with him, his granddaughter Muniya hears brief memories of those travellers: some names survive, others have been reduced to the sound of a voice. The roads are paved, and the vehicles change with time. When an acquaintance, Zahid, dies, Jagesar adds his name to the road as well. Muniya asks when her own name will be counted. Her grandfather replies that the names of the living are not counted; they are called. The story draws a distinction between remembrance of the dead and addressing those who remain alive.

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Story 790 · Three Graves

Erosion by the river claims, one after another, the graves of three generations of Nasim's family: his great-grandfather, grandfather and father. Nasim, Rubina, Zainab Bibi and Aliya search for their former locations and record what each generation can remember. The family will not invent replacement sites or pretend to possess a certainty that no longer exists. They preserve the three names in a notebook, along with only the information they can establish. Even a small recollection of the father's hot tea becomes precious. Some memories may survive the destruction of a place, though there is no guarantee that everything will. The family learns to regard even the little that remains as worth keeping.

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Story 791 · The Flood Mark

For years a brown mark left by an old flood has remained on the wall of Aditi’s house. When repairs begin, the question of preserving it or painting over it releases differing family memories. Shanti Devi, Aditi’s parents and the neighbours do not recount the rising water, rescue and relief in quite the same way. Aditi keeps direct recollections apart from stories heard from others and details that remain uncertain. At last the wall is painted white, but the experience of the flood survives in the family’s conduct and conversations. To the next generation Aditi tells only what she can establish, leaving the remaining questions open for those who come after her.

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Story 792 · The Abandoned Well

Nitya, a university student, wants to learn the history of the village well that has been closed for fifteen years. Her grandmother, Kamala Devi, remembers forgotten names and incidents when she speaks of voices heard near the well at night. Nitya examines its construction, the reasons for its closure and the precautions needed to make it safe. Conversations with Sakina, Vimala and other women reveal that the well was not merely a source of water: it was also where village news circulated and relationships were sustained. Eventually its opening is covered with a secure grille. Nitya understands that not every sound must conceal a story, yet the remembered names of people can live on beyond the well.

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Story 793 · The Dry Maize Leaves

The rustling of dry maize leaves in a field carries Harinarayan Mahto back to a year of famine. As he speaks with his granddaughter Chanda, memories emerge of his yellow bull Hira, Saguni Kaki, his sister Phulo and the grain shared in a time of distress. Writing down the incidents, Chanda asks how she should distinguish a death that occurred during the famine from a death caused by it. Harinarayan acknowledges the limits of what he knows and remembers the help people still gave one another. The green leaves of the new crop do not repeat the sorrowful sound. Memory, the story shows, is not only the return of suffering: it also lives in respect for food, care for animals and gratitude for kindness.

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Story 794 · The Last Boat

When a bridge is built across the river, the regular passengers of the elderly boatman Ramdhani disappear. He does not deny the bridge’s value: it makes reaching the hospital, school and market easier. Yet the loss of his livelihood also threatens the physical skills and identity of a boatman. With Kusum’s help, he begins teaching a limited course in boating safety, while Dinkar learns from him about currents, winds and handling a boat. Gradually Ramdhani learns to offer instruction rather than row the boat himself. In the end, even sitting beside an empty boat, he no longer feels compelled to prove his existence. Change is neither simply a victory nor a defeat, but a transformation in the practice of living.

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Story 795 · The Tree Stump

Passengers ask Naval, a new bus conductor, to let them off “by the peepal tree”, though the official list names the stop “Eastern Square”. He learns that the old peepal was felled, but its stump remains, and so does the name in everyday speech. Moving the bus stop has differing consequences for the walking route, the livelihood of tea-seller Phulo Devi and Chhotu’s new shop. A fresh signboard makes room for both the official name and the one people actually use. Naval discovers that the social meaning of a place does not vanish automatically with its tree; its name continues through the journeys, memories and livelihoods of those who use it.

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Story 796 · Smoke

Sitting at a tea stall, an elderly storyteller sees smoke rising from a field and remembers a morning when seven young men boarded a bus to leave the village in search of work. Their journeys, earnings, failures, returns and the waiting of their families unfold in his memory in different ways. The smoke was no prophecy of anyone’s future; it merely opened a door to experiences already lived. That evening two other young men come asking about the bus timetable, and the storyteller’s grandson helps them in his own way. The old man realises that the story of migration is larger than a column of smoke, and that each generation chooses new ways of travelling. He resolves to watch for fresh departures the next morning.

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Story 797 · The Silent Village

After twenty-four years, Devnath returns to spend a night in his old village. While salvaging timber from the cracked walls and collapsing roof of his house, he sees locked homes, rusted padlocks and deserted lanes. At first he takes this stillness to be the silence of a dead village. Gradually he understands that many of the households' members are alive: they work elsewhere, return for festivals and keep in touch with their homes from afar. Setting aside an old doorframe before locking the house, Devnath stops supplying answers on behalf of those who are absent. The story reveals the difference between a village's empty houses and the lives that have spread beyond them.

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Story 798 · Between Three Years

At sixty-eight, Anima Devi sits in her shop, Anima Writing Service, between an old typewriter and her granddaughter Neha’s computer, remembering three ages of her life. At eighteen she wanted to study history; at thirty-seven she learned to accept five rupees as the price of her labour in writing for others; now she must consider selling or closing the shop. After talking with Neha, she considers opening it two days a week, without making that her final decision. In her changing fingers, practised movements and silences she senses the shadows of the intervening years. A few memorable days, the story suggests, cannot encompass the meaning of all the time lived between them.

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Story 799 · The Reason for Returning

Madhavi Jha, aged fifty-nine, returns from abroad to Darbhanga to arrange the sale of her old family home. Conversations with her brother Vinod and daughter Arya bring back the entrance examination she took at seventeen, her decision to leave home and the incomplete version of that event repeated in the family. Madhavi realises that she first sought a path for herself and only later sought a meaning for her decision. Now her chief concern is that her daughter should not inherit a false account. She explains the old episode without declaring anyone entirely guilty or entirely innocent. As she leaves, she takes a blank notebook bearing the signature of her adolescent self. Sometimes the reason for returning is not the house but an unfinished family story.

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Story 800 · The Sisters

After decades apart, the sisters Mridula and Nira meet again at a school workshop on traditional crafts. They have never fully resolved their disagreement over an old embroidered vine motif and the name of its original maker. As they teach the girls to use needle and thread, the grandmother’s old embroidery, the labour of many hands and a new generation’s independent designs all come into view. Arushi’s new triangular pattern helps both sisters see that no design remains the property of one pair of hands alone. Neither entirely abandons her own position, yet each accepts the other’s presence. At the end, Mridula draws a new line, deliberately leaving parts of it open.

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Story 801 · The Old Doctor

At sixty-eight, Vasudha returns with her granddaughter Ira to a lane in the old market where, as a young woman, she once met Dr Chandranath Jha. One sentence he spoke had given her courage in later life to defend her daughter’s education and right to decide for herself. Looking back, however, Vasudha sees that the doctor’s advice belonged to a wider life of embarrassment, her father’s worries and her mother’s unremitting work. Even if the doctor spoke wisely, he was not a faultless man; nor was her mother’s quiet care of lesser importance. The story brings back into view the many people, kinds of labour and complexities concealed around a single remembered sentence.

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Story 802 · House Number Five

A window in the northern wall of House Number Five becomes part of different women's lives over the years. An opening in Devaki's time later becomes a boundary to be closed for Chandrakala, a shelf from which Sarita sells little packets of spices, a place where Nilima's mother can talk to people in the street, and a source of air and conversation for Anamika's father. Each alteration answers a different need; the person responsible for one change may know nothing of those who made another. People living by the window give it meaning through their own uses. The history of one house, the story shows, is fashioned not by a monument or a single owner, but by the separate labour and routines of people unknown to one another.

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Story 803 · The Photo Album

For Kamala Devi's eightieth birthday, her daughter Chandrima and granddaughter Anvita begin choosing pictures from an old album. The photographs are arranged not in chronological order but through unexpected connections between objects and experiences. Checking dates and events reveals the women's financial contributions to building the family home, the sister's scholarship that helped buy Niraj's bicycle, and the unfinished history of Nirmala's education and employment. Long-accepted family accounts become more complicated in the light of these memories. The final exhibition displays the pictures with brief, carefully worded captions, without altering the original order of the album. The story distinguishes drawing meaning from memory from mistaking that meaning for an established event.

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Story 804 · One Decision

Twenty years later, a jar of mango pickle in the market reminds Sima of a decision made in her youth. To raise an admission fee for her studies, she had suggested that her mother, Savitri Devi, sell her homemade pickle under a store’s name. The earnings made education possible, but the mother’s name vanished from the commercial label attached to her work. Visiting her mother with her daughter Arya, Sima discovers changes in the pickle’s taste and recognises the different sides of that old choice. She calls it neither wholly right nor wholly wrong. Arya learns to make pickle from her grandmother and writes Savitri Devi’s name in her notebook. The story connects necessary earnings, recognition of labour and knowledge passed between generations.

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Story 805 · A Friend’s Daughter

At the town library Sarojini Jha meets Deepa, daughter of her old friend Vinita Mishra. Their conversation recalls a broken marriage proposal from forty years earlier, for which Sarojini has always blamed a single remark made by Vinita. Deepa repeats something her mother taught her: knowing the truth and knowing when, how and by whose right it may be told are different matters. After the meeting, Sarojini admits that Vinita’s words, her family’s reaction and her own wishes together shaped the decision of the past. Brief messages begin to pass between the two old friends again. The story replaces the assignment of blame to one person with the complexities of relationship and the responsibility of using truth carefully.

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Story 806 · The Bus Stop

In Kiran Mishra’s memory, a bus stop witnessed three meetings with Naren Thakur at different times of life. At eighteen Kiran deliberately missed a bus to talk to him. Many years later they met again, but although a means of keeping in touch existed, neither took the next step. At a third chance meeting, they acknowledged their separate lives and families, and their regret over questions never asked. Kiran realises that not marrying Naren is not what she regrets; what remains is only the memory of an unanswered question. Rather than turning away from her present life, she resolves to tell her husband Subhash about the encounter. The story separates the meanings of chance and choice.

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Story 807 · After Marriage

Thirty years into their marriage, Sudha and Devesh must decide whether to repair the roof of their old house or move to live near their daughter Archana. Their conversation revisits moments across the decades when one decided without consulting the other, only for the other to repeat the same mistake later. Memories of a research fellowship, caring for children and managing the household reveal the weight each has carried. They write their wishes on separate sheets and read what the other has said. No final decision about moving is reached, but the question of repairing the roof becomes a shared discussion. Maturity in marriage, the story suggests, means not arriving at one identical answer but giving both people an equal place in the question.

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Story 808 · Mother’s Friend

Two months after her mother Saroj’s death, Aparna goes to see her old friend Lila Devi. Lila recalls that the two women once shared a room while working for women’s education and employment, and that they even quarrelled over an honorarium. Hearing of Saroj’s courage, mistakes, fears and small domestic habits, Aparna understands that being a daughter did not mean she knew the whole of her mother’s life. Lila does not claim possession of some secret, final truth: she was a fellow traveller during one period of that life. For the first time, Aparna sees her mother not only in the familiar maternal role, but as a person with her own struggles and weaknesses. The story grants the mother’s life before her child’s birth an existence of its own.

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The Other Side of Memory

Story 809 · The Letter Never Sent

Shortly before retirement, the teacher Sudha finds in her drawer a thirty-year-old letter that was never posted. At twenty-three she had written it to protest an appointment at a distant school. Later, seeing a transfer application from another teacher, Neelam, altered her understanding of that experience: personal hardship deserved recognition, but the school's needs also had to be met. Returning to the circumstances of the old school at her retirement, Sudha sees how the same letter may raise different questions at different times. She still does not send it, but she does not regret leaving it unsent either. The story explores the distance between words fixed on paper and the ethical understanding that changes within a human life.

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Story 810 · Two Cities

After twenty-eight years in Delhi, Archana hesitates when a government form asks for her “permanent address”. The old family house in her native Darbhanga has changed, while her Delhi home, neighbourhood and daily routine have become habits of the body. Memories of her parents, journeys between the two cities and questions from her daughter Nupur show her that belonging cannot be defined by one address alone. Archana enters the required information on the form, but continues to keep her ties with both cities alive. The story treats home not as a choice between a permanent and a present address, but as a relationship fashioned out of many experiences.

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Story 811 · Twenty Years Later

Twenty years after leaving school, Mridula, Shweta, Nilima, Arun and Meenakshi meet at a reunion. The sight of their old examination room revives the incident in which Meenakshi was accused of cheating. Their accounts differ: what each person saw at the time, who remained silent, and who offered help afterwards. In Meenakshi's own memory, what has survived more vividly than the accusation is the sight of her mother's mud-stained slippers. No one is declared wholly innocent or guilty; the silence of those days matters as much as their subsequent conduct. The story closes as they pose for a group photograph, suggesting that even a truth that exists cannot be contained in its entirety within any one person's memory.

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The Other Side of Memory

Story 812 · At Aunt Malati's House

After thirty-two years, Sudha returns to Aunt Malati's house and discovers that the old back entrance has become the main gate. The storeroom she loved as a child is now a reading room; in her youth, it was in this very house that she announced her decision to leave for training. She has always regarded her aunt as an unequivocal supporter of that act of defiance, but a conversation with Manjari reveals a more complicated history. Just as the rooms and doorways have changed their purposes, the meaning Sudha attaches to her own decision has changed with time. Leaving through the new main gate, she accepts that change does not make her earlier experience false: it only brings its limits into clearer view.

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Story 813 · The Red Trunk

While clearing an old room, Malati comes upon the heavy red trunk once again. Janaki Devi used to keep in it her tailoring measurements, thread and accounts of her earnings; later it held Malati's books, certificates and other family belongings. Now Rashmi, of the third generation, wishes to use the trunk in her new electrical-appliance repair business. Its rust and lock are repaired, but its old paint is not needlessly stripped away. Rather than calling it merely a family heirloom, Rashmi regards it as the companion of three generations of different kinds of work. The story locates the trunk's significance in its continuing use and in the labour of the women who have used it.

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Story 814 · The Music Teacher

During a practical examination in electrical repairs at a women's skills centre, Shabnam Khatoon, who is short in stature, cannot easily reach the high workbench. The centre's head, Nalini Jha, remembers her music teacher Sharda Di from thirty years earlier, who had adjusted the harmonium's position to suit Nalini's height while maintaining the same standard of musical accuracy. Nalini arranges a wooden platform for Shabnam and explains to the examiner that the standard of work will remain identical, though the means of carrying it out may be adapted to individual needs. She subsequently proposes a review of accessibility and safety throughout the training rooms. The story illuminates the essential distinction between equal opportunity and identical physical arrangements.

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Story 815 · Different Paths

At school Malati and Sushama had earned almost the same marks, yet their further studies and careers took them in different directions. In the ensuing years, work, marriage, family, travel and responsibilities of care entered their lives in very different forms. When they meet again, harsh things they once said about each other's choices also resurface. Questioned by Kajal and other young women of the next generation, both acknowledge that no single list of correct decisions can prescribe the course of a life. Circumstances alter the meaning of many choices; what brings relief at one time may create difficulties at another. In the end they walk in separate directions, but the different paths they have taken are not allowed to become an argument against their friendship.

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Story 816 · The Missing Years

Making a family timeline with her granddaughter Aditi, Anima Jha finds herself unable to record precisely what happened during the five years from 1998 to 2003. Those years held a job, rented accommodation, childcare and the immense labour of everyday routine, yet no single dazzling event has remained in memory. The different recollections of her daughter Nilima, son Saurabh and husband Devendra bring parts of those years into view. Anima does not fill the empty spaces with invented incidents. She records two memories, of bus journeys and the household milk account, and leaves the remainder incomplete. The story shows that remembering little is no proof that time was wasted: some years survive in the lives of others and in the habits of the person who lived through them.

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Story 817 · The Last Journey

At seventy-four, Shashiprabha travels by train from Darbhanga to Delhi to spend the winter with her son. A neighbour's question—'You will come back, won't you?'—calls to mind the departure after her marriage, the day she left her daughter Rachana at a hostel, and an apparently ordinary journey begun to obtain treatment for her mother Kaushalya Devi's eyes. That last journey was supposed to last two months, but treatment and changing circumstances meant that her mother could never return to the old house in quite the same way. Shashiprabha understands that what people call a 'final farewell' is seldom recognisable as such when it happens. She refuses to pronounce her present journey the last. The story conveys the delicate experience of a farewell whose meaning becomes clear only in retrospect.

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Nav Pankhi

Complete unabridged story summaries · 837 stories

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New Wings

Complete unabridged story summaries · 837 stories

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Story 818 · Displacement in Space-Time (1/2)

Dhaumya uses examples of one-dimensional and two-dimensional worlds to explain the different dimensions of space to his five students—Apala, Shvetaketu, Raikva, Satyakama and Ghosha. Treating time as the fourth dimension, they search for a way of using the curvature of space-time to connect distant points. Shvetaketu and Raikva study tunnels through space-time, Apala examines cosmic strings, and Satyakama investigates the possibility of additional dimensions. Ghosha establishes an ethical limit for the experiment: even if they reach the past, they must make no attempt to change anything that happened there.

After long and difficult work, they build an aircraft called Pushpaka. Dhaumya himself accepts the danger of its first voyage. In space, extraordinary bends in space-time and an approach to an immense black hole make distant places seem suddenly close. Yet when he observes a terrifying disparity between the passage of time inside the craft and outside it, he decides to return to Earth.

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New Wings

Story 818 · Displacement in Space-Time (2/2)

On his return, Dhaumya can find neither his laboratory nor his students. He faces the world of the year 3100, where journeys through space-time have become commonplace. Only a few hours have passed for him, but nearly a thousand years have gone by on Earth. Rather than ask whether his discovery has brought him fame, his first wish is to visit a library: he wants to know what humankind has learned in the intervening centuries. The story binds together the desire for knowledge, the relativity of time and the responsibilities of scientific inquiry.

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New Wings

Story 819 · A Life with Crutches (1/2)

At a centre for an engineering entrance examination, former classmates Ratish and Phool meet after eighteen years. Both have brought their sons to sit the examination. Their talk while they wait begins with memories of school and moves towards the hardships Phool's family has endured. Phool speaks of the physical differences of his younger brother and his brother's wife, and of the pity and humiliating scrutiny they have faced in society. Both had wanted equality and mutual respect in marriage, not a relationship in which one was a protector and the other a dependent.

Phool's younger brother and sister-in-law have carried on with life through repeated shocks, including the births and untimely deaths of children. As he recalls their experiences, Phool says that a limitation of the body can never amount to a person's entire identity. Ratish listens to the family's story, but Phool says nothing about his own son's physical difficulties.

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Story 819 · A Life with Crutches (2/2)

When the examination ends, Phool's son comes swiftly out on crutches. Although an accident has damaged the nerves in his leg, he is full of enthusiasm for science, mathematics and the prospect of becoming an engineer. In answer to Ratish's question, Phool explains that his son's interests, his habit of asking questions and his hopes for the future are central to who he is; his crutches are only one part. Rather than seeking pity for disability, the story insists upon respect, opportunity and the independent personhood of the individual.

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New Wings

Story 820 · I Will Not Go Abroad (1/2)

Saurabh wins a scholarship to study environmental engineering overseas. His love of science makes the opportunity exciting, but as departure approaches, memories of his village, language and family, and of people struggling against floods, trouble his mind. With Lal Kaka he visits the historian Dwijendra Kaka. Dwijendra describes his scholarship and travels, but also his regret at having lived far from his native place and from a mother who waited for him. He does not condemn foreign study; he only urges that a widening education need not break the threads of human connection.

Just before Saurabh is due to leave, heavy rain falls. From the water-level gauge at school he realises that the stream is rising abnormally fast. With his teacher's help the panchayat receives a timely warning, and residents of the lower hamlet move their families and livestock to safety. Saurabh experiences directly how his knowledge can already be of service to his village.

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New Wings

Story 820 · I Will Not Go Abroad (2/2)

He decides of his own accord not to leave the country that year. Enrolling at a local university, he develops a scheme for monitoring water levels and issuing warnings across three villages. He does not close off the possibility of studying abroad in the future if the need arises. The story's essential concern is not opposition to foreign travel, but the courage to choose the direction of one's life according to one's curiosity, obligations and circumstances rather than the expectations of the crowd.

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New Wings

Story 821 · Migration (1/2)

Because of his father's transfer, Nachiketa, a ninth-standard student, moves from Madhubani to Haldia. The salty air, industrial town, Bengali language and unfamiliar school leave him feeling alone. At times he even imagines that his classmates' laughter is directed against him. In the science laboratory he befriends Tapas, who is gifted at building devices but so reluctant to speak on stage that his work receives little recognition from the group.

Together they make a model that stores energy from sea winds and gives a warning when the water level rises. At first a senior pupil, Devadatta, challenges their right to the project; then a coastal storm gives the idea a chance to prove its usefulness. Following their teacher's advice, the students do not venture outside themselves. Instead, they send local volunteers instructions for a simple warning device made from bamboo, bottles, a bell and a battery. Devadatta joins in the effort. In one settlement, an early warning of rising water helps people reach safer ground.

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New Wings

Story 821 · Migration (2/2)

The joint team does not win first prize at the science fair, but receives special praise for the project's local usefulness. Tapas presents his own work, and Nachiketa gradually finds a place for himself in the Bengali language, among friends and in his new surroundings. He begins to understand that migration is not merely leaving one home: through equality, cooperation and conversation across languages, a new place too may become a home.

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Story 822 · An Exchange of Fortunes (1/2)

Anay, who has come to the district library for help with scholarship papers, meets Chandan Chaube. He recognises Chandan from a talent examination in Darbhanga three years earlier. Back then Anay was quiet, shy and solitary, while Chandan was cheerful, talkative and quick to make friends. That day Chandan had treated him to a samosa. Now their temperaments seem reversed: Anay takes an active part in debates, while Chandan speaks very little.

Chandan explains that after his father lost his job, he had to move house, change schools and continue his studies while helping in a shop. Repeatedly introducing himself to strangers and bearing responsibilities at home had diminished his former ease in conversation. Anay, for his part, recalls how encouragement from a teacher lessened his fear of the stage and allowed his voice to emerge. They realise that labels such as 'quiet', 'talkative' and 'shy' are not permanent definitions of a human being.

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New Wings

Story 822 · An Exchange of Fortunes (2/2)

They establish an 'open table' for adolescents in the library, where everyone has an equal opportunity to speak and listen. Chandan slowly regains the courage to voice his thoughts. On the day of the next talent examination, the two set up a help desk and watch a friendship begin between two new students. Harahari is thus not a simple exchange of two personalities, but a story of recognising people anew as circumstances change, aided by the memory of an earlier friendship.

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Story 823 · The Morning Star Beneath the Pond (1/2)

One dawn in the month of Kartik, Kusum, Mihir, Anshu and Richa go to observe the water and aquatic life of Tara Pond. Kusum sees a bright white point shining far down in the water. Her grandmother used to say that the morning star came to drink from this pond. At first all four friends are astonished. But when ripples from a thrown pebble break up the gleam, and lowering a bamboo pole brings up no object, their wonder gives way to questions.

Their science teacher, Malati Di, explains the difference between conjecture and what has actually been observed, and advises them to record the hour, direction and observer's position over several mornings. From different vantage points the gleam seems to occupy different places. Observing the reflection of a lamp in water in the laboratory helps them understand the behaviour of light. Finally they see Venus shining above through a gap in the trees. Its reflection had looked like a star in the depths, while the branches had hidden the planet itself from direct view.

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New Wings

Story 823 · The Morning Star Beneath the Pond (2/2)

Kusum does not reject her grandmother's folk tale; she understands its value as a memory. It may be that the pond acquired its name from the way farmers and boatmen once reckoned the hour before sunrise. The friends prepare a dawn diary recording the direction of Venus, the condition of the water and the local tradition. By teaching the difference between seeing, believing and testing, the story brings inherited lore into conversation with science.

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New Wings

Story 824 · The Village's Old Library (1/2)

Mayank, Neha and Indranil recognise in a long-closed building at the heart of their village the remains of an old library. Neha's grandmother tells them that pupils, teachers and other villagers once gathered there to read. After its caretaker, Raghunath Kaka, died, the building deteriorated and the key was forgotten amid the panchayat's affairs, until the library closed. With permission from headmaster Sudhakar Jha and the panchayat secretary, the three friends begin looking for the key among the old records.

They find a key matching the pattern described by Indranil's father, a blacksmith, and open the lock. Inside are old registers, science books, maps, manuscripts and photographs. When the name of a young Sudhakar Jha appears in the membership register, they realise how important the library had been in forming their headmaster's interest in learning. Neha's grandmother recognises her own younger self in a photograph of former members. The three friends are now doing more than cleaning a building: they are preserving the village's memory of reading.

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New Wings

Story 824 · The Village's Old Library (2/2)

The panchayat repairs the roof, pupils and villagers donate books, and a rota of volunteers is organised. At the reopening, Neha's grandmother hands the first book to the youngest reader. The old lock is retained as a reminder, but the library is open once more. The story suggests that the lock of oblivion yields to memory, collective effort and continued use.

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New Wings

Story 825 · The Mystery of the Goat's Bell (1/2)

After midnight the brass bell of Ramapati Kaka's white billy goat, Chand, is heard from the direction of the old mango grove, although each morning the animal is found tethered in its shed. The village begins talking of ghosts and unknown powers. Instead of speculating, Prachi, Neel, Vihan and Madhup examine the shed gate, hoofprints, marks left by the horns and differences in the bell's sound. With Neel's grandfather and Ramapati Kaka supervising, they devise a safe way to observe the shed at night.

The traces show that Chand has been lifting the gate latch with his horns, going out and returning on his own. Following his route, they reach the old room of Dulari Kaki. She tells them that Chand was orphaned when very young, and that she had raised him by feeding him milk with her own hands. When she fell ill, Ramapati Kaka took over his care, but Chand had not forgotten either the way back or the affection he once knew.

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New Wings

Story 825 · The Mystery of the Goat's Bell (2/2)

The gate latch is repaired to prevent danger at night, and arrangements are made for Chand to visit Dulari Kaki during the day. At school Prachi writes down the stages of their inquiry: supposition, physical traces and direct observation. The mystery is resolved not by superstition but by evidence, while its deepest meaning lies in the relation between an animal's memory and human tenderness.

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New Wings

Story 826 · The Book Saved from the Flood (1/2)

Unbroken rain in the month of Sawan swells the river and threatens to inundate the village's old manuscript house. Ishan, Arpita, Neeraj and Sonali learn from the custodian, Vidyabhushan Jha, whom they call Pothi Baba, that old village registers, handwritten books and accounts of earlier floods are kept in a lower room. The young people take no risks on their own; they join the rescue only with permission and proper precautions, accompanied by the panchayat's boat, Ishan's father and Pothi Baba.

With planks and ropes they slide a heavy chest towards the boat. They also save a soaked manuscript wrapped in red cloth. It contains an account of a flood written by Pothi Baba's great-grandfather, including indications of earlier water levels and safer locations. While the book is being dried at school, an old mark showing how far the water reached near a peepal tree is reported to the panchayat. Comparing this with current conditions helps them move families from low-lying places in time.

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New Wings

Story 826 · The Book Saved from the Flood (2/2)

Once the flood recedes, higher shelves are installed in the manuscript house, copies are made of important pages, and the students prepare an exhibition called 'Our Village's Memory of Water'. The stains on the rescued book remain as marks of remembrance. The story shows that a carefully preserved record is not merely a relic of the past: it may become useful knowledge when danger returns.

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New Wings

Story 827 · The Children's Science Fair (1/2)

For the school's annual science fair, each team is asked to choose a real problem faced by the village. Madhav, Meenakshi, Arindam and Saloni make two experiments from ordinary materials: a filter of pebbles, sand, charcoal and cloth for muddy water, and a small lamp powered by an old bicycle wheel and dynamo. Their science teacher, Satyanarayan Guruji, pays particular attention to electrical safety and accurate measurement.

At the first attempt a loose wire prevents the lamp from lighting; then the belt slips. The filtered water, too, is not as clear as expected. The four friends record each failure, tighten the wire, correct the wheel's position, change the layers of the filter and repeat their tests. They take care to explain that water which looks clear cannot, for that reason alone, be considered free of germs or safe to drink. At the fair they explain both the uses and the limitations of their models to everyone, from younger children to the judges.

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Story 827 · The Children's Science Fair (2/2)

The team does not win first place, but receives a special commendation for the 'Best Experiment for Public Understanding'. Their greater pleasure comes when younger pupils express a wish to try experiments safely for themselves. The one-day display grows into a weekly gathering called 'Science with Our Hands'. The story affirms the value of honest observation, of refusing to conceal failures, and of bringing science within the reach of ordinary people.

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New Wings

Story 828 · The Mango Tree Decision (1/2)

The great old mango tree known as Bar Aam, standing beside the village pond, holds memories of generations, gives shade to the market and provides a home for birds. A proposal to widen the main road threatens to have it cut down. Sugandha, Anup, Shashank and Ishani do not rely on sentimental protest alone. Following their headmaster's advice, they collect evidence about the tree's girth, the temperature beneath its shade, the flow of rainwater, the birds it shelters and the ways villagers use the space.

An old map reveals an alternative route behind the pond. The road would be a little longer and drainage would need improvement, but the tree could survive. At the village meeting, the four young people acknowledge that a better road is a genuine need too. They ask experts to assess questions beyond their own competence, including the cost and the tree's health. An engineer and a tree specialist examine the proposals and approve a safe route with a bend.

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New Wings

Story 828 · The Mango Tree Decision (2/2)

The new road is built, the tree remains standing and its dead branches are removed with care. The market gathers once more in its shade; four new saplings grow from mango seeds. The decision demonstrates that development and the environment need not be treated as inevitable enemies. Evidence, alternatives and long-term responsibility can be considered together.

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New Wings

Story 829 · A Day Without a Mobile Phone (1/2)

Aniruddha Guruji proposes that his ninth-standard pupils voluntarily spend a day without mobile phones in order to examine their habits. It is not a campaign against phones, but an experiment in attention and control over one's own time. Ishan, Lalita, Mayank, Sujata and Neel inform their families beforehand and arrange other means of contact in case of need. When Sunday comes and the phones are put away, Ishan notices how often his hand instinctively moves towards his pocket or the side of his pillow.

He hears birdsong, concentrates on his lessons and manages to put the fallen chain back on his bicycle. Lalita listens as her mother sings an old wedding song learned from her own mother, and writes down its words. Mayank and Neel, waiting for their friends at the playing field, make some equipment for a game themselves. Everyone watches the colours of the evening clouds for a while with their own eyes instead of photographing them. Yet they also recognise the phone's genuine usefulness for coordinating with friends and obtaining essential information.

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New Wings

Story 829 · A Day Without a Mobile Phone (2/2)

The next day the students compare their experiences and agree on voluntary rules for phone use during meals, study, sleep and family conversations. Ishan switches his phone on again, but no longer feels compelled to check every notification immediately. The story does not urge the abandonment of technology; it asks people to decide for themselves the purpose, limits and timing of its use.

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Story 830 · The Boy Who Counted Birds (1/2)

Every morning Madhav records the names, numbers, calls and movements of the birds around the pond and among the trees. His interest came from his grandmother, who in old age can no longer walk very far. For a school nature-observation project, the teacher advises him to make repeated counts at the same time and place. Madhav brings his friends Neel, Tanya and Lalit. Even Neel, who at first makes fun of the project, becomes eager to recognise the birds of dawn.

Observations beside the pond and in the thick orchard show that both species and numbers vary with location, weather, farming activities and the presence of bushes. Lalit prepares a map, Tanya identifies calls, and they record every uncertain identification separately as a possibility rather than a fact. Having noticed more birds near a hollow tree and shrubs in the orchard, they politely speak with the people erecting a wedding canopy. Its position is changed slightly so that the nesting area is spared.

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New Wings

Story 830 · The Boy Who Counted Birds (2/2)

Bird numbers fall after the wedding, then rise again some days later; Madhav refuses to draw a conclusion from a single day's figures. At school the team presents its findings along with their limitations. In the end, instead of inventing a name for an unfamiliar bird, Madhav writes down its colour, direction of flight and call. The story demonstrates the importance of patience, repeated observation and consideration for the natural world.

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Story 831 · The Clay Robot (1/2)

Watching his grandfather sow mustard seeds by hand along a field ridge, Nachiketa thinks of making a machine that can move through soft soil and release seeds at measured intervals. With Arya, Kanak, Udayan and Shailaja he seeks the help of their science teacher, Aparna Didi. They combine an old motor, wheels and a distance sensor with a bamboo frame and a removable casing of fired clay made on the advice of the local potter.

Their first prototype tips sideways; they adjust its wheels, weight and the thickness of the clay. In the next trial all the seeds drop in one spot, so they make a perforated strip that can be changed. When they discover that the machine cannot detect water in hollows in the field, they add a contact probe from bamboo and old wire. The group records every failure, improvement and limitation. For now the robot is still being tested on dry ridges with only certain seeds, and it must remain under human supervision.

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New Wings

Story 831 · The Clay Robot (2/2)

Even after receiving a special commendation at the science exhibition, the team continues experimenting in the grandfather's field. The potter remakes pieces of clay that have cracked, and the grandfather suggests improvements drawn from farming experience. The story presents new technology not as the enemy of older local skills, but as a tool that can develop through cooperation with them.

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New Wings

Story 832 · The Forest Path and the Talk at Home (1/2)

On the old footpath through the forest to school, Neeraj, Sumi, Afreen and Lalit discover red marks on the trees. A paved road from the village to the market and hospital has been proposed, but the marked route would fell many trees. Their science teacher, Kalpana Didi, urges them to understand the need for a road rather than merely oppose it. The young people begin recording trees, undergrowth, streams, gradients and the ways villagers use the forest.

Raghunath Kaka, a cattle herder, tells them of an old bullock-cart track. It is a little longer, but would require fewer large trees to be cut. The blocked drain that turns parts of it to mud in the rains suggests the need to investigate improved drainage and a small culvert. Speaking with twenty households, they learn that people want a dependable road throughout the year, not necessarily a road straight through the forest. After the children present data and maps at a village meeting, engineers and forest officials are asked to examine the alternative.

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New Wings

Story 832 · The Forest Path and the Talk at Home (2/2)

Ultimately the main road is diverted towards the old bullock-cart track, leaving the forest footpath intact. The young people take on the care of new saplings and the work of discouraging litter. The forest, the story suggests, is not separate from the village: its water, soil, birds and shade are woven into village life.

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Story 833 · The School Among the Branches (1/2)

While reading beneath an old peepal tree beside the pond, Nayan, Megha, Ishan and Reva think of making a place to study on a raised platform among its branches. They consult their science teacher and the carpenter Bisesar Kaka to avoid harming the tree by driving nails into it. Rather than load the trunk or branches, they set four bamboo posts in the ground to carry the platform. They establish rules for limited access, a secure ladder, adult accompaniment for younger children, and closure in storms or heavy rain.

From the platform they begin studying books, birds, leaves and the water in the pond. When a nest containing eggs is discovered in the upper branches, they close the school for some days. Later they stop climbing during the birds' most active hours and move their seating area. Elderly villagers and craftspeople share their knowledge; unverified elements are recorded separately as folk memory. A different study circle beneath the tree makes room for younger children.

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New Wings

Story 833 · The School Among the Branches (2/2)

After a storm the platform remains standing, but nobody may climb it before an inspection. Only when a loose guardrail has been repaired does the school reopen. At the school exhibition, the students say that the greatest achievement was not building the platform, but continuing to ask questions about safety, nature and access for everyone. Beneath the tree's shade, the earth, birds, local knowledge and shared responsibility all become teachers.

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New Wings

Story 834 · The Girl Who Made a Sundial (1/2)

Watching a shadow shift at dawn and listening to her grandmother's traditional ways of telling time, Neha decides to make a sundial. With Meenakshi, Kaushal and Ritesh she sets up a rod in the school's open field and divides the dial into twelve equal sections. But the shadow does not follow the lines they expected. Their science teacher, Archana Didi, explains the relationships among the Earth's rotation, the latitude of a place, the north-south direction and the angle of the rod that casts the shadow.

The team checks direction, adjusts the rod and marks the position of its shadow at specified times on several sunny days. They also record the absence of shadows on cloudy days and the difference between local solar time and civil clock time. A potter, Harinarayan Kaka, makes a durable slab of fired clay. Using its marks, Neha explains shadows, the Earth's movement and the changing seasons to younger children.

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New Wings

Story 834 · The Girl Who Made a Sundial (2/2)

At the science fair Neha makes clear that a sundial cannot work at night or beneath thick cloud, nor can it show civil time accurately to the minute. The school gives it a permanent place in the science garden. Her grandmother's experience, joined to new measurements, teaches Neha that a clock displays the numbers of time, while a sundial awakens curiosity about the forces that make time's passage visible.

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New Wings

Story 835 · The Friends Who Set Out to Save the River (1/2)

Seeing increasing amounts of plastic and other refuse on the banks of an old course of the Kosi, Meena decides to investigate the river's condition with her friends Aarav, Sonam, Tamay and Kavya. Their science teacher, Malati Didi, shows them how to keep dated records at five different locations of the water's colour and smell, floating rubbish, aquatic creatures and riverbank plants. The group understands the limits of simple school tests and does not pronounce the entire river either safe or unsafe.

They listen to the experiences of boatmen, washerwomen, farmers and people living along the banks, and discover that the market, household drains and rainwater runoff all carry waste into the river. With support from the panchayat and adults, a safe clean-up is organised on the bank. Cloth bags and sturdy waste-collection bins are introduced in the market. Instead of trying to block a drain themselves, the young people submit written evidence to the panchayat, prompting the appropriate officials to begin an inspection.

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New Wings

Story 835 · The Friends Who Set Out to Save the River (2/2)

After the rains, they plant local vegetation on a safe stretch of eroded bank and continue regular observations. Although some improvement is visible, the group does not claim that the river has become completely clean. Meena and her friends come to understand that saving a river is not the work of a single day's cleaning, but an enduring responsibility involving people's habits, local administration, scientific patience and care for the future.

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New Wings

Story 836 · A Map of the Moonlit Night (1/2)

Curious about finding directions by the night sky, Anvi begins observing the stars with her friends Neel, Madhav, Champa and Raghav under the guidance of their science teacher, Sudhanshu Sir. With their parents they choose a safe place on the embankment beside the pond. The teacher shows them how to find the Pole Star using the constellation of the Great Bear. The first caution is that the Pole Star points approximately north, but not with absolute precision.

Anvi draws a star map on paper, but a question from her grandmother makes her realise that the sky appears to change through the night because the Earth rotates. For four weeks the group records moonlight, clouds, mist and the positions of stars from the same place at the same time. They respectfully write down older local knowledge of the sky, while clearly distinguishing it from scientific measurement. At the exhibition Anvi warns that it would not be safe to rely on this practice map for travel through unfamiliar country.

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New Wings

Story 836 · A Map of the Moonlit Night (2/2)

Devkant Kaka, an elderly boatman, reminds them that on the river, direction depended not on stars alone but also on the current, the wind and familiar landmarks on the banks. Anvi comes to see that a map records a moment in time, and that changing circumstances also change the limits of its usefulness. The story joins knowledge of the heavens to evidence, caution and judgment grounded in the world below.

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New Wings

Story 837 · The Cheerful Watchman and the Missing Key (1/2)

A brass key with a yellow cord, used for the school archives room, disappears from the bunch carried by the cheerful watchman Bisesar Kaka. Preparations for the annual book display come to a halt. Meena, Ishan, Ranjana and Tushar ask him, step by step, about his work the previous evening, without suspecting anyone of theft. A loosened metal ring on the key bunch and a strand of yellow thread caught in it suggest that the key may simply have fallen off.

Tushar proposes using a magnet, but the teacher explains that brass is not attracted by an ordinary magnet. The previous day Bisesar Kaka had placed an old wooden seat beneath a neem tree. Yellow thread is found caught on a projecting nail there. Some younger children moved the seat in the morning. Reconstructing the sequence, the group discovers the key hidden between the seat's plank and its base.

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New Wings

Story 837 · The Cheerful Watchman and the Missing Key (2/2)

Finding the key is not the end of the matter, and the children do not simply laugh and walk away. They provide a stronger ring, a secure hook, a coloured cord and a register for signing keys out and back in. Before the headmaster they state what the incident has taught them: learn the properties of things, examine evidence before accusing anyone, and improve arrangements so that small mistakes do not recur. The story joins humour to the practice of reasoned investigation.

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